

bernice summerfield

NEW
WORLDS 

THE VAMPIRE CURSE



Mags L. Halliday,
Kelly Hale and
Philip Purser-Hallard

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In the course of a career spent digging up ancient things, Professor Bernice Summerfield has had more than one brush with the oldest and most widely-dispersed race of undead in the universe – vampires. Is she cursed? Or does everybody have to put up with this?

In these three stories, a young Benny files a column for a local news outlet whilst trying to stop an ancient curse escaping from her expiation; later in her life, Bernice joins a galactic tour of vampire history in order to investigate sinister happenings; and an aged Professor Summerfield is forced to confront the equally bloody past of a fellow attendee at the predictably ill-fated First Interdisciplinary Conference on Vampirology.

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Mags L Halliday has climbed over the roofs of Hampton Court Palace and St Paul's Cathedral, and can get herself lost in the British Museum. As this sort of adventuring got in the way of her writing, she is now a civil servant. She has appeared in various short-story collections and written two novels. She clearly watches too much wuxia and is trying to wean herself off bad chicklit.

Kelly Hale lives in the beautiful Pacific Northwest in the country of Cascadia in a magical fairyland city where the streets are paved with espresso beans and the rubbish recycles itself: All hail Portlandia! She's written novels, short stories, and plays. Bernice Summerfield has long been one of the fictional characters she'd most like to meet for drinks at Harry's Bar in Paris.

Philip Purser-Hallard lives in Bristol, where he divides his time between writing and a job you don't care about. He writes a regular online column on science fiction and religion, and occasionally gives talks. He believes that one day in the future, humans will rise up and overthrow their feline masters.



THE VAMPIRE CURSE

A novella collection written by

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The Badblood Diaries

Mags L Halliday

Say Hello...

Last night, everything changed.

Up until then, it had been just myself and two of my post-grad students, Kash and Bobby. We'd arrived on station CT1107 two days before, on the fast route from my college on Sandinista, and quickly established the best bars and restaurants, the dens and the pits, of the station.

I'm Bernice Summerfield, btw, archaeologist and director of this expedition to Badblood. Call me Benny. I'm bringing you this diary via HTP's latest interstitial messaging system, the portable reporter Ee34Y (portarep, for short). Usually I use an archaic pen-and-paper system for keeping my diary (which I realise makes me sound like a typical wannabe 'quirky' academic, but I'm quite normal really), so doing it electronically is a departure for me. I quite like the record-cut-paste function for transcribing conversations, though I still get tempted to rewrite people's sentences. HTP are co-sponsoring the trip, so they're hoping any radio silence from me means the expedition is lost on the previously Prohibited World of Badblood and not that their technology failed. Kidding.

The CT1107 station, orbiting the Quinto sun, is a fairly old one which has been refitted and retooled in the aftermath of the last wars. From the central column of interchange hubs — with their ways of passing the hours or even days between connections — spokes lead out to the dorm corridors. There's a hierarchy, of course. The big liners from Earth dock at the 'bottom', level i, and that's where the best bars, restaurants and dorms are. Can't have anyone who can afford to get out here from Earth slumming it with the students working their way across the galaxy on the freighters up on level io. Round the centre of the column is where the smaller shuttles dock, alongside the charters and indie flyers.

There's not been a shuttle between here and Badblood for three hundred

years. All the negotiations to lift the embargo were done via teleconference. One problem is that Badblood sits under a layer of atomised carbon. Too small to see, too small to effect the planet's biosphere, but well big enough to block out all but the shortest wave of signals. Various complex routers and the like were used to relay the short-wave from the leaders of the Prohibited World back to Earth. To be honest, when the authorities sent down a test message, I'm not sure they expected a response.

A lot of colonies were lost in the intervening years since Badblood was embargoed. Many of them, on rediscovery, had failed without the support of the Empire and left nothing but overgrown starter domes. Others had told their rediscoverers where exactly they could shove themselves. But Badblood had left a receiver open on the old channel and someone had heard the offer to reconnect them. Which is where we come in.

Yuki Harris arrived last night. She's the PR/techie for HTP and will be on hand in case I do something stupid to the hardware. HTP are also hoping to leave a portarep with the Badblooders, like a conquistador offering a rifle in exchange for El Dorado. Yuki herself is charming, but then she would be: it's part of her job to be delighted to meet people and always act interested. She's tall, with blazingly lilac hair stuck up every which way. She's dressed in what the modish mags say is this month's on trend fashion: milit-ho, or military bohemian. So she's wearing a tight military skirt under an off-shoulder blouse embroidered with flowers and what looks mystifyingly like small flying ducks. I've only ever spoken to her by holophone before.

Yesterday, she'd greeted me when she disembarked off the shuttle as if we were long lost family: a delighted cry of 'Benny' followed by the ritual mwah-mwah and a lightening fast, barely there hug. I don't have personal space issues, but I still call that a little forward on a first meeting with someone.

Anyway. Last night, the rest of the party arrived on the evening hyperspace liner from Earth and we were waiting to meet them. Bobby and Kash had cried off being in the welcome party for the final members of the team, citing some zombie movie screening up on level io. Although we'd been out last night and covered all the basic small talk, Yuki and I were yet to bond.

'The two guys from Kikan should be here any moment,' she said when my small talk on travel ran down. The Kikan, a Japanese organisation, are our other co-sponsors. Suddenly she was on tiptoe and waving enthusiastically.

'Ooh! There they are!'

Two men were coming through, their dark suits looking rumpled from the flight. And kawaii, one of them is super cute. Dark hair, all ruffled up like he was fresh out of bed, and an infectious smile. And all of about twenty-one years old.

'Hi, I'm Ren Moreau,' he said. Why did I have to be standing next to

Yuki when I met a cute guy? She's all attractive and instantly at ease, whilst I stand there pigeon toed in my old brown pedal pushers, scuffed trainers and a faded t-shirt reading 'Archaeologists Do It In Holes'. I probably have all the allure of a wet weekend on Ritter B. Still, when he smiled at me, raising an eyebrow at Yuki's excited chatter, I felt myself go all mushy.

While they effused over each other, the other Kikan man, the older one, held out his hand. 'Allyn Kong,' he said, as I shook it. Wow. He's one of a handful of Kikan men who has a name for himself outside of their organisation, having written several detailed studies on the universality of vampire lore across different and unconnected cultures.

'I've read your work,' I lied. 'The treatise on comparative mythology was particularly interesting.'

'How kind of you to say so, my dear.' I hope he's not the patronising type. That can get real old on a expedition, especially when I'm the one heading it up. And with him representing the co-sponsors I'll need to be polite. Maybe he's just cultivating the traditional old-fashioned persona of an academic? Certainly, he's older with the first hint of grey at the temples, a trim beard and scribe-induced calluses on his hands.

Naturally, we all went out to welcome the new arrivals to the team, and I may have embarrassed myself.

I say may, as I have no recollection after the fourth bar was visited. That was after dinner, so one might hope that the cushion of excellent tostadas and bread at Chez Potts on level 5 would have absorbed the shock of the subsequent crash of alcohol. But no.

In Gunabara's — a karaoke bar on level 6 — I know I ended up standing on a stage singing 'Go Go Techno Girl'. It's the kind of place the rich travellers can go and pretend to be slumming it in their thousand schilling choos, and columnists still getting the hang of putting things on expenses don't feel like they are taking the mickey. Before my decision to toast HTP in song form, we had 'enjoyed' a version of 'I'm Every Woman' from Carrie, one the four slumming thirty-somethings on the next table. We knew they were slumming as Yuki had been giving me the lowdown — in an awed whisper — on how much their ridiculously big bags with their names embroidered on had cost. Amazing how something that expensive can manage to look like a cheap knock-off of itself.

Anyway, with my natural charm and grace, I think I established the classic love/hate sparring relationship with Ren, the Beatrix/Benedict model, in order to cunningly hide any attraction. I am, after all, dig director and should not be showing favouritism.

I know what you're thinking: why are you putting these thoughts into this column if you don't want him to know? Well, partly because my esteemed editors at HTP have made it clear to me that you, dear readers, respond well to honesty and intimacy from your columnists, which means more readers and, frankly, more money for me. (See, that was both honest and intimate.) And besides, although HTP's newest technology is able to

punch a transmission out of the deadspot of this system, it'll take a day for this to reach HTP and be repackaged for normal transmission. And by the time that gets back to us here, we'll be planet-side. Where HTP channels can't be received. So, at least for as long as we are on Badblood, it's our secret, OK?

Badblood Rising

I'm on our charter shuttle right now, heading for Badblood.

We gathered slowly, passing through security airlocks and looking a little better or worse for the evening out. Allyn was already there when I arrived, reading an e-book. He was neatly pressed, his old fashioned shoes glinting to suggest he'd been playing with the shoe shine machine in the hallway of the hotel. You'd not believe that at 1am he was knocking back another whiskey sour.

My students arrived with me, hauling along a sealed hypalette with all our kit on it. One of the biggest annoyances about mounting an expedition is the amount of paperwork you have to go through just to get your own kit to the right place. Especially to a Prohibited Planet. All kinds of questions about contamination and the like. So the bulk of the kit is sealed away. I've got my own rucksack as well, which contains all the basics. Manual tools like trowels and brushes, in case of power problems. A medikit, in case of injuries (often taking the form of bruises from falling into trenches or out of bars). An antique lighter modified to run on safe 'petrol', in case roughing it is needed. Emergency rations, in case of extreme hunger. A quart of brandy (local laws permitting), in case of... well, medicinal needs, obviously.

Bobby is tall, broad and Irish pale, with a dirty chuckle and freckles. Kash is his opposite, skinny, Indian, with a evil sense of humour and a grin. Well, opposites attract. They became my students at the start of the last academic year, my first year in my post as a visiting tutor at Sandinista. At first, I thought they were trouble and had Kash pegged as the ringleader. Two weeks in, and I muttered under my breath during their Friday lunch time tutorial about wishing I was down the pub instead.

'Why don't we, then?' Kash asked.

'What?'

'You want to be down the pub. So do we. Why are we sitting in your stuffy office pretending we want to be here?'

'Er. Well, it's not actually my stuffy office. It belongs to someone who's on research leave.'

'The point remains, though,' said Bobby.

After that, their tutorial was always held in the bar. I think that they probably got more one-on-one time with their tutor than any other students on campus. Whether it was quality time is another matter. So when I was told I could invite two students to join me on this jolly, Bobby and Kash were the obvious choices.

They'll make good archaeologists, as well.

Kash immediately slumped backwards into a chair to wait, his eyes hidden behind massive shades. Bobby pulled out his personal scube game set, plugged himself in and started pulling faces as the zombies on screen bashed him up.

Ren was next through, and came over to sit by me. Don't get excited, girl, I told myself.

He still looked crumpled, even though he wore a fresh white shirt under his dark suit. If there had been a shoe shine machine outside his room, he'd not used it. I'd hoped that, when I saw him this morning, I'd realise I was being silly but no. I was instantly reduced to my fourteen year old self: tongue tied and restless when actually receiving attention from a boy.

'Morning, Summerfield,' he said, nudging my knee with his.

'Morning, yourself.'

Smooth.

'Good to see you upright again.' Oh, I so must have fallen over last night. I did check for mysterious bruises this morning, in case I had demonstrated my excellent clumsiness by walking into the table or a bit of the room. So as well as a scruffy tomboy, he now thinks I'm a klutz as well. Brilliant first impression, Summerfield.

'Upright, horizontal, diagonal — I'm good at all angles,' I tried, then mentally kicked myself as I saw Kash's brief smirk. I'm just not good at morning banter.

'I'm sure you are,' he replied.

Luckily, Yuki arrived to save me from digging an ever bigger hole than the infamous never-ending dig on Equinus 3. Naturally, she did not look at though she was standing on a chair raising a toast to something or other at 1am last night. She wasn't dressed down, although the clothing did look a tad more practical with ruffles only around her neck. If it weren't for the small hypalette she was dragging behind her, carefully packed with dull grey metal cases stamped with HTP logos, you'd assume she was off on a six week starcruise around the Magdalene Cluster rather than about to rough it on a Prohibited Planet.

'Well, are we all here?'

'In body, if not in mind,' Kash said, nudging Bobby to make him look up from his squee.

With us all gathered, the gate to the charter shuttle opened. This is what travelling on HTP's coin gets you:

- **A private charter shuttle to take you the seven-hour journey down to the planet side**
- **Unlimited food and drink**
- **Including alcohol**
- **The latest g-cushioned seats, so that you barely notice the forces dragging the shuttle towards landfall**
- **A wide choice of HTP channels to watch (although thankfully not yet updated with my column from yesterday), which the pilot informs us will shut off as we pass into the atmosphere of Badblood**
- **Fingertip manicure caps that smarten up your nails in seconds**

Trust me, the manicure caps are a deal-breaker. All archaeologists like a manicure. When you end up digging through earth and using your bare hands to scoop aside grave dirt, a quick scrub with soap and a nail brush is not going to cut it. I quickly pocketed as many as I could, along with handfuls of flash-packed mini bags of pretzels.

Badblood is rising towards us. Or we're falling towards it. White and green lines are banded across the land masses so it looks like a peppermint green humbug. Our pilot just announced we'll be coming in to land in a few minutes, so I'll see you on the other side.

A Brief History of Badblood in 22% Paragraphs

I'm still getting the hang of HTP's new portarep device. I wrote a few hundred words last night, after landfall, but must have said the wrong command and lost it all. I'd ask Yuki how to recover a draft from the cache, or whatever clever trick it has for recovering lost reports, but as I'm fairly sure I wrote about her last night I'd rather she didn't see it in case I was being rude.

Yes, I know, I know. She'll see all of this once we get back home. By then I'm sure we'll have become fast friends who will laugh over such foolish first impressions and recount them at each other's weddings or some such. I hope.

It has occurred to me, a couple of days too late, that I should perhaps have changed everybody's names for the purposes of the column. Oh well.

A tall woman, with red hair and blue eyes, wearing a traditional cheongsam dress in flaming red and gold was waiting for us in the empty arrivals hall. The collar was stiff around her neck but her arms were bare in the heat. She brought her palms together and bowed towards me.

hao, Professor Summerfield. I am Ruby Woo, we made arrangements for me to be your guide. Please, this way.'

Bear in mind Badblood has only recently been allowed to make contact with the rest of the galaxy, and that's been solely via short-wave radio links to CT1107 station. The magnetic fields surrounding the planet prevent them getting anything more than basic information through the network, and the embargo introduced after the first two waves of the 'curse' mean they've had no actual physical contact for three centuries.

We really should have brought an ethnographer along.

Unfortunately for us, this expedition is deemed too risky to send a full re-contacting team down. Like canaries in mines, we've come down first to test the air. You might have been wondering why this isn't being written by Bettina Hewnsaw, Jaime Hughes or Arkansas Smith — the big names of pop. archaeology and that's the reason. No insurer would let them lead it as Badblood is too unknown. So, you've got me. And no ethnographer.

One of the two things most people know about Badblood, if they know anything at all, is that it was settled just over three centuries back by a mix of Chinese and European humans. Ruby Woo, with her pale Celtic colouring, silver bangles and Chinese dress was an example of how the cultures had merged. She spoke with an accent, the faintest trace of old estuary English.

Ruby Woo had arranged transport, an old fashioned bus, powered by fermented rice. We bundled in and the driver took us off. The bus took us along a long straight track, over a click wide and smooth as the silk of Ruby's dress. There were very few powered vehicles on it. Off to both sides, the land was heavily cultivated. Either half-submerged rice fields, tall rows of grain, pulses and mulberry bushes or low fruit orchards. I noticed there were no cattle, and the farmers we passed were using solar-powered machines rather than the oxen or horses you more normally find on retro-agrarian colonies. The strips of cultivation were only covering around a click off the track, as well: beyond were pale grasses, gnarled trees and tangled brambles. These must have been the bands of white and green we saw as we descended.

After half an hour a town appeared on the horizon ahead of us. It looked small and glinted with black surfaces.

'The Hunanzun settlement,' Ruby said. 'We'll be staying here and heading over to the dig site in the mornings.'

Getting closer I realised we were not driving towards the settlement, we were catching it up. Hunanzun was hovering in the middle of the road.

'Actually,' Ruby said, 'we're in its track.'

As we approached Hunanzun, Ruby explained more. This was the Badblooders' answer to their 'curse'. Night was dangerous: the attacks would start after sundown. So they started to drive. At first they all took to their heels in individual transport, driving to stay on the daylight side of the planet. There were a lot of crashes, a lot of torn up crops — not ideal on an agrarian colony — and a lot of trouble. Break down, with no-one to help, and you might well die. Being a driver-mechanic suddenly gave you the highest status within the survivors. With the Earth Empire cutting contact with the colony, the Badblooders made their own solution: solar powered hovering settlements.

Each is no more than a click in circumference and has its own track running across the planet's surface. The parallel bands of white we'd noticed as we landed are the main tracks. Solar cells generate the power to hold them above the ground in synchronous orbits a few centimetres up.

Secondary paths ran up diagonally, connecting the settlements but still always carrying people westward.

`Every few months we have festivals to celebrate the seasons, taking the settlements themselves up the connecting tracks to visit our neighbours.'

Alternatively, and with a rather less pleasant smell, the buses would move smaller groups. They were kitted out with survival kits in case anything happened.

All the upper surfaces of Hunanzun were covered in the slick slate glint of solar panels, like an emo Emerald City. The buildings themselves were constructed from carved wood and bamboo, clearly local materials. There were no windows we could see.

The bus driver beeped and someone waved from a lookout on the wall above us. A wide lip of metal was dropped to make a ramp and the driver revved up. We juddered into the settlement and the ramp was lifted back up. It was clear, as we drove into the streets, that Hunanzun had its back to the outside world. Inside, the buildings were revealed with shutters folded back to reveal the insides of houses and shops. We passed a crossroads where an animated argument was going on, watched by a crowd from the teahouse on the corner. As we passed, all the attention swung to us.

It's not just that we're the first offworlders to see inside Hunanzun for three centuries: it's that we're the first offworlders they've seen at all. I looked across to Ruby, who was waving a greeting to someone in the cafe. She looked back and smiled.

`Don't worry,' she said when she saw my sudden apprehension, 'we won't bite.'

No, I thought, but the 'cursed' will.

Stop the Settlement, I Want to Get Off

As with all travel diaries, I'm starting to run out of synch. I get some bare scribbles down in my lo-fi diary (i.e. the paper-and-pen one) — little thoughts and impressions and notes-to-self — and then try to write them up for here. So today I'm sitting in a bus heading out to the original settlement, where we'll be starting the dig, but in this diary, I'm still on that first night in Hunanzun. Let's see if I can catch myself up.

Ruby had us booked into the hotel in the central plaza of Hunanzun and left us to freshen up before the evening meal. Each settlement has a small hotel. Space is strictly limited, so there's no room for families to have spare rooms lying empty in case of visitors. As the settlements tend to intermarry, there are family visits to see new-borns, celebrate milestones or mourn the dead, so 'communal temporary accommodation' was set up. 'Hotel' is just less of a mouthful to say.

The room itself is a decent size and simply furnished with two single beds which can be clipped together to make a double, a chair that folds out into another bedroll and a small shower unit. The shuttered window looks down into a tiny, tiled courtyard where a small fountain gurgles. Most importantly, there's a good size desk along one wall which the hotel owner informed me Ruby had asked to be provided. Clearly, our hostess knew something of the academic security blanket that is a big desk to spread out work on.

Laid out on my bed to greet me was a silk tunic in a vivid blue. Faced with this bit of glam, I considered briefly showing up in my dig clothes but after the last two days' travel looking less like a woman and more like a something you'd find under the shed after a long winter, I determined to make an effort. I had some generic black trousers scrunched up in the

bottom of my rucksack, for emergencies, and they'd look good enough with my trainers and a brush through my hair.

Back down in reception, Ren was the only one waiting. I could see him swallow his surprise.

'Benny, you look delightful,' he said, leaning in to kiss my cheek. 'Also,' he whispered, 'you're buttoned up wrong.'

'What?'

Before I could stop him, he was undoing some of the frogging down the side of the tunic and refastening it in the right order. The thing about those tunics is, they're very tight-fitting. And the thing about the fastenings is, they run up the side. So Ren's knuckle was brushing against things in an entirely thrilling and appalling way. He could have barbecued dinner on my cheeks.

Allyn coughed meaningfully behind us, and we jumped apart. Yuki was stood next to him with a half-smile on her face. Whilst I looked 'delightful', she looked 'ravishing'. Where I had a tunic, she had a full length cheongsam in the same blue. It was only then that I noticed the dark tunics the men were wearing all had the same blue along their hems and cuffs. Either the hotel used a cheap supplier, or blue symbolised something. I've no idea what.

Ruby arrived, still in red but now with an orange jacket over it. Next to her stood a small man, greying at the temples but with a sun burnished face.

'Everyone, this is Oliver Chen. He's to be our driver-mechanic for the expedition.'

You could tell from her voice that we should be considering ourselves lucky to have a driver-mechanic of his status, so I bowed at the waist. Hoping I didn't look as clumsy as I felt.

'Oliver is one of our most experienced adventurers, risking trips off-track to explore,' Ruby explained.

'Don't people leave the track then? I saw workers in the fields...'

'Well observed, Ms Summerfield. Due to the necessity of working only when the fields and rivers are sunlit, workers will head out westwards in the morning, travelling ahead of the settlements. Before dusk, they will head west again, to catch up the settlement that has overtaken them during the day. When Ruby Woo says 'off-track', she means that I have not only left the tracks but also the cultivated areas within safe reach of the settlements.'

'You stay out overnight?' Allyn asked, with the first sign of curiosity I'd seen in him.

'Quite so. Now, shall we eat?'

Ruby led us across the square to a long narrow street. The high sides of the buildings meant that, even though the sky above us was still a midday blue, the street was lit with paper lanterns. All the floor length shutters on the ground floors of the handful of restaurants and shops that lined the

road were half-open, revealing darker rooms within, lit with candles or fairy lights, lanterns or chandeliers.

As we walked, I could feel people watching us. Yep, absolutely no-one else was wearing the exact shade of blue we were. Ruby was bowing to a man on a door and gesturing for us to go inside a restaurant which looked expensive and did not have nearly as many clients as the teahouse we had passed in the main plaza.

Inside, the walls were a deep dark red, and the furniture's black lacquer shone with reflected candlelight. It was like being out at night, despite the sunlight we knew was outside. Ruby smiled.

'As you may imagine, we quickly discovered that the human body does not like sunlight all the time. The diurnal patterns we evolved back on Earth couldn't cope. All of our buildings are constructed so that we can close the shutters or use light-denying fabric to block out the daylight.'

'To be honest,' Ruby said, 'even we were surprised the solution worked and the colony survived.'

'No thanks to the Empire,' Oliver grumbled. 'We were left to sweat it out ourselves just because we wouldn't agree to their trading tariffs.'

Ruby shushed him, but I remembered from the briefings we'd had that Badblood's name came as much from the falling out with the authorities as for its curse. We couldn't really expect them all to be happy to see negotiations re-open.

'Isn't staying out at night terribly risky?' Allyn asked.

'That's why people call us adventurers. I still find nightfall the most disturbing experience I have ever had, especially knowing the "cursed" may be out there.'

The food arrived and we set to eating. I'm still not convinced about rice that has been grown in muddy fields, then boiled. Same with fish farmed in rivers. It seems far too uncontrolled. However, after a couple of rice wines, I found myself wolfing down the food. As well as rice and steamed fish, there was a traditional fish stew with garlic, herbs and tomatoes which was rather spicier than I'd expected.

'Have you ever encountered the "cursed"?' Allyn asked.

'No..: Ruby was cautious, her back stiffening as Allyn pursued his line.

'Do you know people who have?'

'Yes, someone over in Dongjiang settlement.'

'And they lived?'

'They filled their ears with wax and tied themselves to a pole driven into the centre of the circle.'

I kicked Ren under the table and mouthed to him that it was rude to discuss other people's curses at dinner and for him to make Allyn stop. He winked and leaned over to his senior to whisper.

'I beg your pardon, Miss Woo.' Allyn said, with a bow. 'I just find the whole idea so fascinating...'

The wine was also stronger than I had expected. Combined with the

travelling, the dislocation of the bizarre day/night world and conversation which needed my full focus to follow the gist of it, I found myself slumping against Ren a little. He smiled and took my arm to guide me back to my hotel room.

Where absolutely nothing happened.

The Floating City

I woke as the bell tolled nine. As there's no sunrise or sunset to tell the time by, a bell on a central tower rings out every hour. Loudly. Although my head was fine, my stomach felt queasy. It took me several minutes to realise the roiling sensation was a form of seasickness and not the result of the previous evening's wine intake. It seems parts of my body have yet to adjust to the constant faint quiver and shifting movement of Hunanzun as it grinds its way across the face of the planet.

Today was a free day, a chance for us to have a proper look at the settlement and for it to have a good look at us. The portero gave us tokens and directed us over to the Good Health and Fortune teahouse on the adjoining side of the main plaza. There we were served well-seasoned jook (more rice) and deep-fried devils (a type of long doughnut also known as churros), along with strong coffee.

Ruby arrived as the bell struck ten, with four teenage Badblooders in tow. They looked a combination of fascinated and nervous.

'These are the four students who will be helping us with the dig,' Ruby explained, 'and today they will be your guides around Hunanzun.'

Ruby ordered us all fresh tang yuan filled with sesame paste and we all took stock of one another.

Becka Liao is the first one I noticed. She's beautiful in that way that seems effortless for some confident teenagers (i.e. not me when I was her age). Her long straight black hair swooshes about like a shampoo blipvert. She'll have to tie that back once we're working. She's wearing a pale pink suit, and has tied a red sash around her waist to emphasise her waist. When she smiles, it's wide, showing even teeth and failing to crease up around her eyes so the emerald green still glints. Green-eyed? Me? If she had any brains then maybe but it's immediately obvious that she's here

because her boyfriend is and this is a great excuse for them to get away from their watching families for a bit.

Aleksandr Valverde being the boyfriend. Tall with European features, as you might guess from the name. Next to Becka he seems pale-skinned, but he's still more tanned than the Kikan men. Broad shouldered but narrow-hipped, like a swimmer. He's not dressed up like Becka, and wears a dark blue work suit, weather-bleached on the shoulders so he's clearly been out to the fields before. He's hoping to get one of the very limited post-school academic places on Badblood, hence the shame-free demonstration of willing by giving up his last pre-work summer digging a hole in the ground. Also, of course, the previously mentioned opportunity to make out without prying parental eyes.

Marsha Jimenez is going to be making up for the lack of adult chaperoning, though, by keeping a watchful eye on them. Well, on Alek. You can see her scowl deepening with each giggle from Becka. She's shorter, with black cropped hair dyed pink at the tips and tied back with a purple scarf. When she laughs, it's a rolling chuckle. Of them all, whilst Alek may want to be Ruby's student, on today's impression Marsha is the one I suspect she will pick.

And then there's Will. William Siu. Quiet, big, with a mop of brown hair and a half-smile. He admitted pretty much straight away that he is here to escape. If he wasn't volunteering, he'd be heading off to the paddy fields around now. I didn't like to say that he's be mostly up to his ankles in mud as an archaeological volunteer as well.

We split off into pairs then. I found I was with Ruby, which suited me just fine. I had a lot of questions about how the settlement worked, how the colony's culture had evolved and what we might find tomorrow. Oliver suggested he show Allyn around and Alek suggested he partner Ren. Becka honed in on Yuki, unsurprisingly. Kash offered to partner Marsha, leaving Bobby with Will.

Ruby and I started off walking westwards, towards the exit ramp. From the viewing platform above it, I could see a wide expanse of grasslands cut through with the hard-packed white soil of the track. You could even see faint waves dashing across the crops as the passing of the settlement sent out ripples of wind. The farmers we were passing were clad in white or blue so that they stood out against the greens and browns of the cultivated land.

After a few minutes watching the apparently uniform track being eaten by the settlement, during which Ruby pointed out various elements of the farmers' work, there was a beep of a horn below and, juddering, the exit ramp was lowered. Two vehicles gunned their engines and barrelled out, accelerating into the distance. They didn't look like the standard buses we'd seen earlier, and the workers were clad in white or yellow.

'They're the fishermen,' Ruby explained, 'We'll come back and see them at work later.'

Back at ground level, she took me along the perimeter: a narrow lane with high-sided buildings that ran the circumference of the settlement. The sunlight only touched the tops of the buildings here, and laundry had been raised on pulley systems to reach it. The streets between the narrow perimeter and the central plaza were not laid out uniformly. Instead the shapes of them suggested the organic way the population had grown into every few centimetres of space as the generations had grown. There were broad spokes running out to the edges, and a couple of concentric rings. But within the segments created were areas of tiny alleys and inward facing mansions whose dappled courtyards could be glimpsed through archways. A couple of smaller quadrants had been made into gardens where older citizens sat and watched us walk by with open curiosity. Another couple were playgrounds, filled with equally curious children.

Returning to the main square, Ruby took me over to the tallest building. I'd noticed it last night. Clad in metal, it blinked and winked in the bright sunshine. Ruby had to sign us both in before we were allowed past the door.

A Badblood Ghost Story

I'm still a day behind where we actually are, you know. Luckily, the portarep has an auto-reminder which pointed out today's content is for the Sunday brick edition. The one that will take you the rest of the week to read and you'll doubtless end up taking the reader into the toilet cubicle with you. And, btw, eww. Now wash your hands.

Anyway, Ruby was showing me around the settlement, and has taken me to the tallest — and most secure — building. 'The ground floor is the council chamber, where we can debate issues and where civil ceremonies are held.'

Up two flights of stairs and we passed a level which thrummed with energy so hard that my teeth rattled. Ruby yelled into the doorway of a darker room and a woman in overalls emerged.

'Engineer Jimenez, this is Bernice Summerfield.'

Jimenez wiped her hand down on her overall before offering it to me, despite not looking remotely oily. It must be some ingrained trait in engineers. She looked like Marsha, down even to a throaty chuckle when she asked if I was the person foolish enough to employ her daughter for the summer. Her fingers, I noticed, were slim with tightly trimmed nails. Touring the engine room with her, she pointed out various elements proudly.

'The standard settlement has 36k of arrays on it, enough to collect power to see them through a three day storm. Hunanzun has a storm life of five days. My father rigged up the back-up so that it doesn't just take any overflow of charge, it manages the array alignments to ensure we have the equivalent of 64k.'

Going up another level and we came to a room totally encased in glass. The views stretched in every direction, the midday sun hidden above us

only by the ceiling. To the west, a heat haze shimmered where the track met the horizon.

'Benny, this is pilot Wen Jiao and navigator Pia Cai.' They wore simple dark tunics and trousers. Jiao bore a striking resemblance to Becka, so it was obvious that they too were family. He explained his role.

'We maintain the speed of the settlement so the crews in the field will know exactly where we are. Too slow and we risk the nightfall, too fast and we risk leaving them behind to face the darkness. We prefer to have people here, in case anything happens to the automation. It's easy for me to correct the course the moment I see a drift but if I had to run from the bottom of the tower, we'd have to take longer to correct things.'

'You can't turn a tanker on a sixpence,' I agreed.

He looked at me curiously and then nodded.

'I think I see the simile. We need to be ever watchful of the course. We're coming up to Land's End, right now, and that always needs attention.' He gestured westwards and I realised that the glimmering horizon was not heat haze as I had thought. Without even a dip in its stately progress, Hunanzun slid down the shore and quivered into the air above the cresting waves.

'Safely launched,' Jiao said.

'Taking the helm,' Cai responded, pressing a few buttons.

'This is the Straight of Tan Dun,' Ruby explained. 'Only fifty clicks wide, so good for fishing.'

As we passed, I could see the curious buses from earlier bobbing through the waves and white and yellow clad workers hauling on nets. The curved bodies of the vehicles were revealed as amphibious hulls.

'What about wider seas?'

'Some settlements have to cross them but the water is too deep to risk the settlement, and lacks good fishing. For those we've built track bridges.'

'What about storm damage?'

'There's telemetry: a bridge goes down, the settlement is warned and can divert up the transverse tracks to the next undamaged bridge. The big storms only whip up every few decades, anyway.'

By early evening — according to the bells, although the sunlight is still as strong as noon — we'd meet back up in the Good Health and Fortune teahouse for dinner. More rice, more fish, and more large communal pans filled with fried things. A lot of eating is done with chopsticks or fingers, and I've noticed that the teahouse seems more like the social hub of the settlement than the restaurant we went to last night. The main floor is overlooked by a balcony that runs about all four sides. When the shutters are open in the day time, old people sit upstairs and play chess. At 'night' the shutters all close and the crowd gets younger. Most of the farmers, when they climb out of the buses at the end of their shift, come in to slug back a swift drink before heading home. The younger — clearly unmarried ones — stay later, eating around a large table on the ground floor as we are

doing. Some of the elders were still up in the balconies though, watching the behaviour below.

All of our party was pretty excited, and the local students were looking a lot less apprehensive about tomorrow when we start the dig.

I came back to the table after a comfort break to find Ruby explaining the details of the curse. 'The first settlers lost to it were the monks, of course.'

'Of course... wait, what?'

'When the planet was settled, before it became Badblood, it was intended as a pastoral haven founded on Taoist principles.'

'So you had monks, who of course went to live outside the first settlement?'

'Yes, shaolin monks.'

I nodded, as if I knew what she meant. Bobby, however, sat upright and coughed.

'You're telling me they were cursed chi vampire kung fu monks?'

All the Badblooders around the table nodded.

'We're trained as well, of course,' Alek explained. 'Five years of study to get the defensive and attacking movements as fluid as possible. Lots of sparring.' He smiled at Marsha, and they knocked fists together. Clearly her unrequited crush on him had started on a crash mat.

'And how often are the creatures encountered?' Allyn asked. It seemed like, in the absence of an ethnographer, he'd decided to take on the role.

'Every few years there's a report from someone who got stuck out overnight,' Oliver looked up to the galleries and beckoned to someone. 'Yi Hernandez! There's people here want to hear your story!'

An old man, who we'd seen sitting in a corner of the balconies all day, nodded and shuffled down the stairs to our level. The Badblood students respectfully made way for him, so he sat commanding our attention. Without even a gesture from Hernandez, the barman brought over a jug of rice wine and poured some into Hernandez's mug.

'People always want to hear the story,' he said, in a quiet but firm old estuary accent, 'until they hear it and then they wish they hadn't.'

Before his fingers had started to shake, he'd been a silk farmer. Like the others, he would head out in the morning and start work tending to the trays of silk worm eggs slung beneath the mulberry trees, or turn over the chrysalides as they dried, or sit of an evening unpicking strands of silk.

'It's nice beneath the mulberry bushes. Shady at noon so you don't get heat stroke, and cool and dry. Not like standing ankle-deep in water, eh, Will? Never did like water. Prefer wine.'

'And that was the problem, see? My late wife, rest her soul, would put wine in my flask instead of water. It being a lovely warm day, I had my lunch and sat back beneath the bushes to let it digest. There was plenty of time till the bus would come to collect us.'

'When I woke, the sun was low on the horizon. It was strange, to see

it orange, and the sky turning to darkness above me. It's not natural, I thought. Looking up, though, I saw stars for the first — and only — time. So tiny, yet so brilliant and captivating.

I realised I'd slept through the bus, so I packed up my kit, checked I had my dagger and started walking eastwards. Towards where I knew the sun would rise and the settlement would appear. As I walked, I kept looking up to see those stars. So beautiful, so distant. I never thought I'd meet some off-worlders from those very stars here in Hunanzun.

After a while, I began humming to myself. Just a little tune to fill my ears and reassure me. I'd pause every now and then to take a swig of the wine and it was then that I heard it. Someone else was humming my little tune. Except it was higher in pitch, and somehow more alluring.

I walked on, and the tune followed even though I'd stopped humming it, so I knew it was no echo. I wanted to turn off the track, follow the sound, but in all that darkness? How could I see where I was stepping? I could see the track, glimmering white in the starlight, so I made myself follow it. My feet were starting to drag, and I longed to stop. Just for a moment, I thought, as the dawn cannot be far off.

Sitting, I faced east. There was a chill in the air such as I had never felt before, and the first faint light appeared pale pink on the horizon. The singing was louder, close by my ears. I covered them with my hands, leapt to my feet and ran. I stumbled, and felt something catch at my leg! Then, bright lights came on. A bus had driven ahead of the dawn and caught me in a beam of light. The driver-mechanic caught me, and helped me into the vehicle. Looking down at my ankle, I saw it was covered in ash, in the shape of a clawed hand.

Of course, I muttered to Yuki under my breath as more drinks were brought, 'an old man will tell tall tales if there's a drink in it for them.'

X Never Marks the Spot

And we're up to date. An hour ago, we bounced off the track and the students stopped covertly looking at us and stared outside the bus. Although Will, Marsha and Alek have been out to the fields before, it's also always been by the tracks. Driving cross country, here in the uncultivated land, freaked them out a bit.

As we left Hunanzun, Ruby had issued all of the off-worlders with plain daggers. The blades are sharp and thin, and the sheath tucks neatly into a boot.

'You won't need them, of course, but in the unlikely event of having to use it, aim for the heart.'

'Shouldn't they be wooden stakes?' Bobby asked.

Ruby has clearly got the measure of him, as she stared for just long enough to disconcert him before answering.

'No, steel does the job best.'

Just now we're setting up the dig at Lujing, the original — and very much static — settlement. It's just under a sixth of a day's cross country drive from Hunanzun and would be cultivated except it's on rocky higher ground. The sort of ground you'd naturally pick as a first base on a new planet. Since the colonists took to their vehicles, the original flimsy buildings have been left to rot.

We're digging two trenches, cutting across the areas suggested by the survey bot I sent ahead yesterday. I never entirely trust the bot, who I've nick-named 'X'. It takes in all the factors: the geophysics, local history and the like. What it doesn't have, what X can't have, is the instinct. The sense for the interesting bit, the key which unlocks the stories hidden in the ground. It's not easy to explain, but there's a tingle.

So rather than dig just where X recommends, I'll take its reports, peg

out its suggested trenches, then brew up some coffee and pace the site. I'll move those pegs about until I know we'll dig up something interesting.

We started on trench one a few minutes ago.

This is the way we're working. (See, you're learning something.) Each layer of the dig will be captured and uploaded to my excavation notebook (the HTP B2Padd — very nice with excellent folksonomy tools. Product placement ahoy!). Ruby will also capture the layer using her digibook, to go into Badblood's own archives. Then we'll recover any artefacts from that layer, being careful to handle them using sterili gloves and bags. The sterili kit ensures there is no contact between the person recovering the artefact and the object itself, so any subsequent tests cannot have been contaminated by modern data.

Artefacts sounds impressive, doesn't it? You're thinking ancient weapons, gold masks, crystal skulls...

Generally, what we find is other people's rubbish. Literally. Anything lost, discarded or thrown out rather than recycled, comes back as an archaeological find. There's a layer of Earth archaeology where others have found mountains of refrigeration devices clustered outside 'authority' housing. Some speculate that it means conspicuous consumption of white goods, discarding them casually, was a symbol of the authority of those houses, but I'm not so sure.

Anyway, at this top level we've been mostly finding farming implements, coins (not exciting ones), and broken crockery. Broken crockery being the one given in human archaeological history since someone first worked out how to fire clay and someone else first dropped it because they ignored their partner saying 'careful, it's hot!'

Each day we'll get driven out here by Oliver, work for a few hours and then be collected and bussed back to Hunanzun before nightfall can reach us. He's off doing other chores in the mean time: work checking field boundaries or telemetry systems. I wanted to set up camp out here but permission was refused. Although Ruby and Oliver have stayed out, they wouldn't countenance any off-worlders risking it. Or the students. There's a duty of care they — and I — aren't willing to risk, there.

Gossip Girls

Last night, Yuki and I went to grab food at the teahouse without the others. Ruby had family duties and Allyn said he and Ren had things to do.

'Kikan things,' Yuki muttered.

'Yeah, what's that all about? D'you think it's code for something?'

We were on our second bottle of rice wine at this point, having quickly scoffed down a tray of tapas and dim sum. The teahouse was in the process of switching from its daytime role as a gathering point for the settlement's older folk to its night-time role as one of the places to go in Hunanzun for good drinking and, more importantly, gossip. We'd bagged ourselves a booth at the back, where we could talk more easily than out front. I'd not been sure about that, what with things having been a little strained between us over Ren, but now the heat of that second bottle was kicking in and Yuki had become a drinking companion. OK, so not an actual friend or confidante, but it was a thawing of the whole cold war.

'What? Like secret rites binding them together? 'Cause Kikan men always come together.'

There was a long pause when neither of us wanted to be the first to say it.

'Ew!' I cracked first, and we both pulled faces and giggled. Not at the idea, but at the idea of Allyn and Ren... just pass the mind bleach, please.

'So, what then? Why did they have to head off all hugger-mugger tonight?' I asked. Yuki was originally from Earth, she had to have a better idea than me. All I knew was from bad holo-anime.

'Hugger-mugger? Is that some old Earth term?'

'Yeah. I think it was about embracing teenage thugs or something. Anyway...'

`Anyway. All I know is that the Kikan were very instrumental in convincing the Earth authorities to try getting back in touch with the Badblooders

because of the "curse"?'`

`No, because the Kikan pretty much pwn the sushi market back home.' I must have laughed at this point, as Yuki frowned and leaned forward. `Think about it. Sushi is, like, one of the most expensive dishes you can get now. Sure you can get rice from Whiiton, or fish from Jerome, but those planets are further out than Badblood. Securing a deal with this planet would give the Kikan control of a good chunk of the supply chain.'

`You're serious?'

`Maybe.' She sat back and shrugged, 'Or maybe there's something else, something from the original pre-colony survey reports, that they want to control the access of.'

I sipped some wine. 'And here I was thinking they were just kawaii boys in neat suits.'

`Trace the Kikan back, and you find yourself with psi-powered yakuza. They've gone legit, and Ren certainly is a kawaii boy in a suit, but don't be fooled by the "we're esoteric academics" business. They're still a powerful organisation you don't want to hack off.'

We watched more people arriving to take drinks for a couple of minutes.

`Ken is kawaii, isn't he?' I ventured. 'I wonder if he has psi-powers?'

`Maybe. It's not like psi.s have to wear a badge any more. I bet he's got something rubbish like...'

- being able to flip beer mats?'
- getting guards to look for some different bots.'
- never needing to brush his hair.'
- x-ray vision, so he knows what underwear we've wearing.'

`I hope not! I didn't exactly pack the latest from Von T's VaVa Shop. Maybe the ability to read minds?'

`Gods, imagine that.'

We both imagined for a moment what he'd have heard when we met him off the liner, if that was his psi-power. I shuddered.

`That's my cover blown, then.'

Yuki smiled and patted my hand. 'Don't worry, I think he likes you most anyway.'

Strangely, having a beautiful and fashionable woman telling me she was conceding on any imagined battle we might have been having over a guy, did not fill me with pride at my own victory. Instead, I wondered if Yuki was just being nice. They're probably already an item and she doesn't want HTP's star columnist stomping off in a mood or anything.

A Matter of Light and Death

Today, in trench two, we dug up some graves.

I did expect to. X, the bot, had marked the spot, based on the high concentration of calcium and my programming it to prioritise potential graves. Still, there's always a faint shiver when the first coffin is revealed.

'Who is it?' Marsha asked, crouching down to look at it. She'd grown up in a society where every death was recognised and mourned, and the dead person known. Ruby, who has a better grasp of historical context for all that she has the same background, brushed away the loose soil from the top of the soft wood but there was no hint of a marking.

'It looks like they were buried in a hurry,' she said. 'Which suggests it's from the last wave of the assaults.'

'Are you OK with this?' I asked, looking at all the students. Your first grave dig is never that pleasant. One by one they nodded, so I set them the task of clearing the remainder of the level. It meant working in the trench, revealing two more coffins at that layer of ground. But they'd wanted the experience and it'd be something to tell the grandchildren.

'Hey! I've not captured the level in situ yet!'

Allyn was by one of the coffins, running his fingers along the edge, when I heard Bobby's shout. The Kikan man turned to me.

'We can make a start though, surely?'

It was tempting, that's the thing. If your job is to discover things and you mostly dig up discarded broken pots, then the allure of grave goods — which are more likely to at least be intact pots — is pretty high. It's why archaeologists get a reputation as grave robbers.

Even if I ignored my professionalism and cracked on, though, there was

the problem of time. There was no way we could document additional material in situ, bag it, box it and be ready in time for the return bus. Looking at my watch, I realised we should already be prepping to head home for the day: the bus was due in an hour. Oliver, the driver-mechanic, tended to arrive early and help box up, so we will be sure to get back to Hunanzun before darkness falls.

I directed Allyn and Ren towards documenting the current situation, which at least gave them a chance to get up close to the graves. Bobby and Kash helped Ruby and Ito bag and tag, whilst the other students boxed up. There was so much revealed at this level that it wasn't until Ruby drew me aside a few minutes ago that I realised something.

'Oliver isn't here yet.'

I looked at my watch, although now she had pointed it out I could see how low the sun had become. I've started to get used to the sun always being overhead so finding it on my eyeline was a bit freaky. The Badblooders were sensing it, as well, with only Ruby amongst them having seen the sun set before.

'He's normally early,' I said, and Ruby nodded.

'Normally, yes. But even if he had to cut it fine, he'd be here by now. Benny, we need to prepare. In case.'

When we'd first driven out here we'd set up emergency kit. A solar powered genny had been placed with its arrays unfurled to catch the sun, and a stack of low energy, high UV lamps were in a long locked case. The idea being that you rig up the lamps to create a circle of strong UV light, powered by the genny, in which you spend the night. A sort of high tech version of the magic circle of salt you see in bad early Earth horror movies. Obviously, we'd not be needing it because a) we had transport back to the safety of the floating settlement and b) any cursed Badblooders must be long dead by now. Starved by the lack of humans within their grasp.

Except Ruby has said that sometimes farmers went missing in the fields. And there's been those stories in the tavern.

Night is falling very quickly, so we've already lit the UV lamps and circled the metaphorical wagons. As director of the dig, I'm responsible for everyone here, so I can't let my own worries show. But I am. I am worried.

Bernice Summerfield is Unavailable

EDITOR'S NOTE:

Bernice Summerfield is missing and has not filed her column. Given the circumstances of her last sign off, we are strongly hoping that the portarep has failed and that we will have news from her tomorrow. Due to this unforeseen incident, we are rerunning the Clivian Twisk review from the latest issue of our sister paper, the Sunday HTP. For more of Clivian's sophisticated wit, sub to the Sunday HTP every Sunday.

Diaphanagm, Metrocapital Hotel, CapCit, Prelnik.

As educated readers will no doubt be aware, your humble writer's esteemed family have a long history with the MetroCapital Hotel, centrepiece of the capital city of Prelnik. My grandfather General Wormwood Twisk, never one to make military decisions without appropriate refreshment to hand, commandeered the MetCap's elegant cocktail bar as his command HQ while he quelled the '28 uprising. Later, my Uncle Feltham, the broadcaster and wag, shot the last surviving native as he cowered under the billiards table in the hotel ballroom. Rumour has it the old rogue was too drunk to shoot him cleanly, and one of the other residents had to finish the poor beast off with a pool cue.

So it was with a certain trepidation, and awareness of great days past, that my cousin Belmarsh — who is something in finance, or maybe law - and I attended the re-opening of the MetCap after its 438-million-schilling refurbishment. As this is a restaurant review column, we won't trouble ourselves unduly with the fashionably minimalist decor, with mock rococo

fittings and only seven dedicated servants per suite, except to say that the private pools are barely deep enough to drown an uppity sub-editor in.

Belmarsh and I were there to sample the new hotel restaurant, the tautly named Diaphragm, which has replaced the charmingly old fashioned grill restaurant that used to be centrepiece of the hotel, General Chick-Chuck's House of Wings. Sadly, the fashionable nouveau riche no longer appreciate the sophisticated values of the General's Megabucket, and a more contemporary eaterie has been installed.

First impressions were poor, the distinctly plebeian decor themed around a motif of austere rusticity, prompting Belmarsh to comment that the design computer must have lacked a good private programming, and was probably the product of a comprehensive software house. Vishla Etun, as they say on Neptune. (Yes, it's a dead language. Look it up, then teach it to your offspring so they can at least pass for civilised.)

Thankfully, the food made up for the dreadful aesthetics. For the first course, Belmarsh had the raw fishgut soup ('impertinent', apparently) while I sampled the vintage rockmould. The mould had been well matured over two hundred dank years, to get the correct musty odour and dry, decayed texture that fizzes to gas on the tongue.

For the main course, I had a regional classic, the whole Frelbian lungbird, reinflated and served with a marshtruffle sauce, while Belmarsh continued on his piscine tip by opting for the local cheesefish marinated in reconstituted bodyoils. The cheesefish was very raw, and while my cousin attempted to deliver the killing blow with the silver hammer provided, I sank my fork into the tender lungbird. To my delight the lungbird had been cooked to perfection, the chest emitting the perfect high pitched screech as the air seeped out. The flesh itself was bloody with a slightly nitrate aftertaste — delicious.

For dessert we opted to share a bowl of pasteurised otterphlegm, fresh from locally sourced otters. While the self-righteous brigade protest against the deliberate reinfection of otters with virulent chest infections, and the vigorous application of suction tubes to harvest the phlegm, few would, if given the opportunity to sample it themselves, deny the rich, milky merits of the finished product. Belmarsh and I clashed spoons as we finished off every last morsel.

The wine list was adequate, but unspectacular, a few too many fashionable dragon wines for my palate, but with some hidden gems such as a full bodied '67 Vremnyan red. Prelnik is clearly suffering from the destruction of the Imperial cellars, in which 10,000 bottles were tragically lost. [Subs — re: cellar thing, I think there may have been some deaths or something. Fill in details here, with sympathetic noises. Don't let this note get through to the final version or there'll be trouble. CT.]

Although the appearance of Diaphragm may be inappropriate to its venue's glorious past, the menu is one that honours the victories of old, and pays tribute to the resilience and breadth of human cuisine. If it continues

to serve fare like this, the MetroCapital will justify its refurbishment, and indeed the violent taking of Prelnik from its previous savage inhabitants, for many well-fed centuries to come.

From Dusk till Dawn

Cruk. Crukin' cruk.

Apologies if you are reading this over breakfast, or aloud to your kiddies or something. Last night was not good, at all. We're back in Hunanzun now, recovering.

As dusk started to fall, Yuki, Alek and Kash worked to link all the UV lights up to the portable genny, whilst we got as much equipment as we could within the circle. I was lighting a fire, the hard way. My ancient flint lighter smelled of petrol as it flared over the scrunched up blank pages from the back of my diary I was using as kindling.

'The fire won't protect us, if they exist,' Allyn said. 'It's UV light which is the key and the lights will stop them.'

'If they exist, and if they are out there, I want to be sure we see them coming.'

'Again, lights.'

'I learnt very early on not to rely solely on technology for my life.'

Ruby was issuing us all with flashlights, sturdy and heavy ones. 'The UV content of the light is pretty low, I'm afraid, but if all else fails they make good clubs. And remember your daggers.'

With Yuki confirming the lights were good, we sat down to an exciting meal of hard rations. I had enough in my rucksack for each of us for the night, whether people wanted them or not. Yuki, Bobby, Will and Becka took the first watch, sitting at the edge of the pool of light and shielding their eyes so they could peer into the darkness that had fallen beyond.

Ruby was nibbling cautiously on the rations. 'Is this what everyone out there eats now? This gou-shi?' she asked.

I laughed. 'This is just for emergencies,' I told her. I was glad of just having something to chew on.

'Tomorrow,' Ren suggested, 'I will cook you the latest cuisine, dishes from the Diaphragm restaurant on Prelnik. I took a master-class there the other month.'

'Oh!' I said, rustling in my bag, 'I've some pretzels from the shuttle as well!' We agreed to save them for breakfast.

Allyn stood. 'If we are taking shifts, then...'

'Shhh!' Will had stood from his place on watch, dropping back into a defensive stance. On the balls of his feet, with one arm back towards us, he was staring out beyond the lights. We fell silent, out breath suddenly too loud. I couldn't hear anything over the low chug of the genny.

'There's nothi—' Bobby started to say before we heard it. High notes in a haunting melody drifting above us and piercing the other night sounds. We were all standing now, looking into the darkness. The Badblooders were all crouching slightly, their stances shifting as they looked around. Ruby and Will glanced at each other.

'It's beautiful,' I heard myself saying.

'It's not,' Will said quietly, 'it's a call to your death.'

Not the best way to reassure people, thanks. Becka was starting to panic, looking for Alek. The song rose in volume, as more voices joined it.

'Where's it coming from?' Kash asked, looking around him.

'They're all around us,' Allyn said.

'It's beautiful,' Alek said. He had moved closer to the edge of the lighted circle, looking out into the darkness with a rapt face.

'...no...' Becka and Marsha were both racing towards him, trying to grab his arm, to stop him. And then the others started yelling, trying to get everyone to stay where they were. And the notes still sang out, cutting through all our shouts.

Before I could yell to everyone to shut up and stay calm, Alek was shrugging aside the women and stepping outside the circle. As she fell, Becka hit the leg of a light stand, so that it fell to the hard ground, sending up crazy beams. When it hit, something joggled loose and we were left with nothing but firelight and screaming.

'Torches!' I yelled. 'Everyone: fall back to the fire and light your torches. Yuki, Kash: get those lights back on.'

There was more shouting, more screams, and that damn song high above it all. I swung my torch beam in a steady arc, flashing past Yuki and Bobby as they frantically rewired the circuit, past Marsha running back in, Allyn with dagger drawn, Will and Ruby crouched low and circling, Bobby and Ren swinging around their torches. For a moment, caught in the beams, I thought I saw white robes swirling but when I tried to find them again they were gone.

Becka was pushing herself off the ground and stumbling back towards us. Her pale suit was torn at the knee where she had fallen, and she was shaking. Will took her by the shoulders and brought her close to the fire, which she stared through.

'Where's Alek?' Marsha asked.

'I-I-I don't know. He pushed me away and then....I was so scared.'

'Don't start all that innocent school girl stuff now. You and he are joined at the hip. Where is he?' Marsha was up close and yelling. Around them, the others were still looking into the darkness, and I could hear Kash swearing as he helped Yuki. Will glared at Marsha.

'Leave it. She's really upset.'

Becka looked up at him gratefully, then reached up to cup his cheek in her hand, raised herself up on her knees and kissed him on the lips.

Ruby leapt over the fire towards them, feet first in a flying kick, but it was too late. The husk of Will fell to the ground. Ruby's kick knocked Becka to the ground. She flipped back onto her feet, but before she could move, Ren and Ruby had her gripped in arm locks.

'She's infected,' Allyn said, and I had to agree.

Becka began keening, the high unnatural note singing out of her, and we could hear the creatures in the darkness responding. I looked around. Yuki and Kash had stopped, staring over towards us.

'Keep working on those lights,' I ordered, 'we'll deal with this.'

Allyn and Marsha were staring in fascination at Becka as she writhed in Ren and Ruby's grip.

'She's infected,' Allyn repeated, 'it's real.'

'It is probably dead out there,' Marsha said.

'There's others out there and they're looking for a chance to attack,' I said.

'Then we need to dispatch it straight away,' Allyn said.

Kill, I thought. He means kill. He means to kill Becka. She was crying in earnest now, looking around wildy and wide-eyed at everyone. The sobs sounded human, like a lost scared girl. But her eyes were red, with no pupils.

'Benny —' she started.

'Don't listen,' Ruby interrupted, 'She'll sound reasonable, she'll sound normal but she isn't. She's just an animal now, looking for a way out of here.'

She didn't look like one, she looked like a scared young girl whose boyfriend had just been dragged out into the darkness and whose friends were suddenly looking to kill her. The tension between her and Marsha, that had simmered along these past few days, looked ready to spill. Marsha had her hand on the hilt of her dagger and was watching Becka with fascinated hatred.

'She's already dead,' she said, 'and Alek too.'

'Maybe it's not real...' They were looking between Allyn and me for permission and I didn't want to be making this choice. I knew Allyn had already made up his mind though.

'We could tie her up, wait for morning, see if she really is infected...' I tried.

'We can't wait. There are others out there and if it's here our attention is split. We risk everyone being killed.'

He might be right. That was the hardest thing to accept.

'No,' I shook my head. 'We bind her, put her in a tent and wait till morning.'

'At least gag it to stop it calling the others,' Allyn protested. Despite Becka's wild eyes, I nodded. As Bobby moved to tie a scarf across her, she jack-knifed her body and slammed both feet into his stomach. One arm pulled free of Ruby's grip and punched Ren across the face. As he released his grip in shock, Becka flew at me.

Actually flew.

I stumbled back, falling and scrabbling at my boot for my dagger, unable to see clearly as the torch beams swung wildly.

'Got it,' Yuki yelled, and the lights flared back on.

Becka fell to the ground, screaming, as the UV light flooded the circle. She writhed and wailed, her body jerking spasmodically. With a final scream, she exploded into dry ash.

Yuki and Kash ran over to lift me upright. No one spoke so all I could hear was the chug of the genny and the siren song of the creatures beyond the circle.

We have to wait now for rescue. People know we're here. You know we're here. We just need to stay safe until dawn.

The Way to Dusty Death

A bus arrived as soon as possible after sunrise, Oliver looking frantic at the wheel. There'd been a fault, a worn-down part giving way. With all the other transport collecting workers from the fields there was no way to replace it, and no time to divert another bus to collect us. Oliver and the other driver-mechanics had worked all night but, with the time approaching to leave and no fix likely, he had commandeered another driver's bus.

'You're here!' he said, hurrying over to Ruby. Then he saw her face, looked around and saw who was missing. 'Becka? Alek? What happened?'

'The lights failed.'

We filled him in on the drive back, leaving out some of the more uncomfortable detail such as our argument over killing Becka. In Hunanzun, we stood about in the square, uneasy suddenly. Ruby wiped her face with her hands.

'I'll need to report this, and speak to Becka, Will and Alek's families.'

'Shall I come with you?' I asked. I felt responsible, and at least I could take some of the blame Ruby would receive.

'No, you should rest.'

'If they hadn't come out with us...'

'If the transport had any spare parts, if we'd not been cut off from the manufacturers' for three centuries, if the light circle hadn't broken... there are many "ifs". Every Badblooder knows the risks of going off track. Their families knew it. It's not your fault.'

This, oddly enough, did not reassure me much.

We trailed into our small hotel in silence, conscious of the looks of the locals. They had eyes, they could see the girl who always drew their attention had not got off the bus. Already, the scuttlebutt would be heading towards the students' families.

I hoped Ruby could get there first.

Upstairs, as we were parting in the corridor, Ren took me by the shoulders.

'Benny, look at me.'

I looked up to see his eyes wide with concern and his face serious. When our gaze locked, he smiled gently.

'It's not your fault.'

Instead of his face I saw, for a moment, Becka's as it exploded into dust. I realised the dirt that coated me was not soil but grave dust: her grave dust. I'd never feel clean again, I thought, shuddering.

'Benny? Do you want me to stay with you?'

It's the sort of question I'd really wanted to hear from him two nights ago. The kind of thing which gets woven into a fantasy seduction. He'd say it, I'd nod, draw him into a kiss and then into my room. There would be lingering looks, breathless kisses and absolutely none of that business where you end up knocking noses or realising you're in the emergency pair of knickers.

It just wasn't the sort of question I wanted to hear now. And I have a feeling it was meant in a fraternal way. And even if it weren't my hollow thoughts would turn what should have been fun into something grim and desperate. I shook my head, looking to the floor so Ren wouldn't see the tears forming in my eyes.

'Well, I'm just next door, if you need me for anything. Anything.'

I nodded and fled, before I started to cry openly and ended up with his pity hugs. I leaned back against the inside of my door, hugging myself and closing my eyes as if that would stop the tears. In the swirling darkness at the back of my lids the patterns reshaped and I saw Becka again. Her face flying towards me, snarling and red-eyed... then exploding in the harsh painful light. I felt the grit on my arms beneath my fingers and felt sick. I had to shower. All the hot water and unperfumed soap in the world wouldn't sweeten my skin.

Grave Matters

So, we went back to the dig this morning. After all that has happened, Oliver is now joining us all day. His bus has been overhauled and signed off normal duty for the remainder of our stay. Rather than sit and read all day in the shade, he has offered to help us, so taking the place of the lost students. Not that any of us pointed that out.

The first hour was spent checking the gear. We made sure the lights were undamaged and the genny still collecting energy. With that done, and the signs of the struggles scuffed away as we worked to get back to normal, the next task was to start work on the coffins.

Trench one, the one that crossed a section of town square and a tavern was all dug out. We had everything of interest from them, and a limited amount of time left. I asked Oliver to work with the bot X to fill trench one in. That might seem unfair, giving him the grunt work away from the 'interesting stuff' but he'd not really been aware of what the work entailed when he volunteered. Seeing him blanch when I'd announced the plans for trench two, I thought it best to give him something else to do. And we have to return the trenches to their former state anyway.

Ruby took several more captures of the coffins in situ before I nodded to Bobby and Ren. The wood on the first one was so rotten that it didn't need their full strength to prise it open.

Inside was a female body, reduced to bones and the hint of clothing. Her hair, reddened by the years' exposure to the soil, was coiled beneath her head. Around her, crammed into the space between where her body would have been and the walls of the coffin, were coins and what may once have been paper money. And a small glass vial, its contents long gone.

The second was much the same. A man this time, with a long queue to

denote his seniority. Unlike the first, he had died of natural old age. After confirming that, the Kikan men were less interested. Allyn was particularly itchy to get on to the next coffin. After lunch, we agreed there would be time to open the third coffin today. Oliver had joined us by then, X trailing after him like a strange puppy after a schoolboy.

What we found was different.

Within the normal wooden casket was a smaller one, made of metal. We expected to find a child, then, as someone had taken the time to build an inner casket, and it was too small for even a teenager. Instead, the contents were ash and bone.

You might think, with the strong Chinese heritage to their culture, that the Badblooders would have embraced cremation. It had become the standard in the land-starved Earth during the great expansion, as well. But part of their 'back to nature' founding was a restoration of the natural cycle. So burials were brought into fashion, and a cremation from the early period of settlement was highly unusual. All that changed when they took to the hovering settlements though: with no space to bury the dead on the settlement, and with the land within easy reach of them prioritised for farming, the dead were cremated and scattered to the winds once more.

There was something nestled in with the ash, a small black diamond which made Ruby gasp.

'It's a memstone! Quite rare, but we sometimes find them when we're ploughing fields.'

'Is it a gem?'

'Not just that, it'll hold an impression. Like a natural piece of silicone.'

'Why's it in this?'

Ruby shrugged, so I answered Kash's question.

'Possibly it held a record of something momentous or sentimental about their lives.'

I double-checked my gloves were on and carefully lifted it free. The ash clung to it as I put it inside a sterili bag. Ruby resealed the casket and lifted it out of the wooden coffin. Once we've taken samples, and analysed them, she'll arrange for it — and the other disinterred remains' — reburial.

As we were boxing up the day's finds and loading them onto the bus, I realised Marsha wasn't with us. Losing another of the local students was the last thing I wanted to happen. Things had already become uncomfortable at the settlement, although no-one had actually said anything to us.

I spotted her out in the scrubland beyond the circle, in the same direction that Alek and Becka had vanished in. She was standing, looking out towards the setting sun and hugging herself.

'Marsha?'

'Hi, Benny.'

'You OK?'

She scuffed the ground with her boots, swinging her body from side to side.

`You fought in the last wars, didn't you?' she asked.

Not for long,' I told her. 'I bailed ship as soon as I could.'

`It's just... does it get easier? Losing someone like that?'

What to say? That, in time, you'd forget the horrors and think mostly of the good times? That sometimes a smell or a comment or a fragment of a song would remind you not of their life but their violent death? Was it better to have seen Becka's death, or to be imagining Alek's? And with them from a tight-knit community, there would be less opportunity to escape reminders of things best left behind.

`It_ fades. In time.'

`I don't want to forget.'

`You won't, not exactly. You'll just remember it less often.'

She didn't look entirely convinced, but followed me back to the dig anyway.

Energy Crisis

I was feeling pretty wiped by the time we left the restaurant earlier this evening. Each night, before going to eat with the others, I spend a couple of hours cataloguing the day's finds. And again after the meal. Cataloguing is dull but vital, especially when the finds will be left planet-side. As a result, I've become a regular face at the late night tea house on the main square. I say 'tea house': after lights out, it becomes a bar, serving rice wine and mind-jolting coffee ideal for ensuring you stay focussed.

We came out of dinner later than usual, as Allyn had been unusually gregarious. He'd spun a long comedy of errors involving the early Kikan, a time traveller, an alien data entity and a schoolgirl. It apparently explained why Kikan men don't wear ties.

I took his arm as we walked along the alleys towards the main square and our hotel. Both he and Ren would offer their arms to myself and Yuki, alternating each evening. It was incredibly old-fashioned and patronising, but as it meant I spent every other evening walking the artificially dimmed streets arm in arm with a cute young man, I decided it was merely quaint. I was feeling slightly off-kilter as we walked, like I'd just stepped off a long travelator and my gait hadn't adjusted. When we reached the square, I realised that wasn't a side effect of the rice wine or my exhaustion.

The square should have been sunlit and almost empty as people went inside and tuned out the light. Instead the square was the rapidly deepening amber of a sunset, and was filling with people. Oliver pushed through the increasing hubbub towards us.

'Have you heard? The settlement is stalled!'

'Stalled?' I asked.

'We're not moving!'

There was an edge of panic in his voice: the first time I'd seen his practical and stoic attitude falter. But then, like us, he knew what would be converging on Hunanzun as it was overtaken by the rising darkness. The cursed would be coming.

'What's happened? Why's it stalled?'

'No-one knows. The pilot says it just powered down.'

'Aren't there back-ups?' Allyn was asking.

'There should be.' Ruby had joined us now. 'Someone said they failed to kick in. The pilots and drivers are trying to trace the fault and get us moving again.'

She looked up at the shadows rising across the buildings. 'We're about an hour before the darkness reaches us.'

We were silent then, imagining how soon after the twilight the singing would start.

The chatter in the square rose in volume as some new people arrived. The settlement's head, Villanueva, two pilots and two driver-mechanics, Oliver explained. I recognised Becka's father and Marsha's mother amongst them. Villanueva climbed onto a bench hastily dragged from the tea house.

'Everyone, please. Can I have quiet?' He was a tall man, imposing in a dark tunic and with salt-and-pepper hair tied into a long queue. 'As you will be aware, we are currently stalled and the back-ups are not yet online. The mechanics are working on that but, as you can tell, we will be overtaken by the night before we can start running again. There is no reason to panic.'

'What about Becka?' someone called, to general murmurings of agreement.

'It's true that there has been an attack a couple of nights ago, and this suggests we may be at greater risk than normal. The cursed will have more energy than usual and may actually make an attempt on us. However... HOWEVER, we are all well trained and can repel any attack.'

'The ramps are still drawn up,' the pilot I hadn't met said, 'and we all have our stations to go to.'

There was still a deal of grumbling but, with fearful looks up at the sky, people started to move. Oliver and Ruby stayed with us.

'What's happening?' I asked. 'What can we do to help?'

'Stick with me. Oliver, you should take your place on the walls. I'll stay with Benny and the others.'

Ruby looked around. 'Where are Bobby and Kash?'

'They went for a meal at Marsha's. I think they wanted to ditch us for the night.'

Ruby pointed off the square, towards the most eastern corner. 'She lives down here. We'll find them and stay at hers.'

As we ducked and dived along the alleyways, they got darker. The high

walls which made them picturesquely gloomy when the settlement was in the sunlight made them feel like rat runs now the sun had gone. All the buildings were closing their shutters against the darkness, so that only thin shafts of light escaped and lit our way. They'd no need for streetlights normally, so the alleys were unlit. I wanted to reach down and take the dagger from my boot. Except, I realised with alarm, I'd taken the dagger out before we went to dinner.

'Ruby,' I whispered, daunted by the darkness, 'I don't have my dagger.'

'Me neither,' Yuki admitted.

'Ren and I are always armed,' Allyn said. The Kikan men are trained to fight such things, of course, but Ren had admitted the other night that Becka had been the first time he had ever actually encountered any kind of vampire. So I wasn't that reassured by Allyn.

Or by the scream that cut through the air at that moment.

Before Ruby could protest, or tell us to stay put, we ran towards the scream. Not least because I recognised the swear words which were being shouted and they weren't Badblood ones. Skidding around the corner, I realised we'd come to the eastern gate of the settlement. The ramp, which should have been up, was down and Kash was kneeling before it. In front of him was a large husk, already crumbling to dust. Others were lying around the ramp, and around six creatures were looking up from them, towards Kash and the couple that stood close by. Marsha was holding hands with Alek, a look of enchantment on her face. Alek, his eyes glowing that eerie red, was smiling mockingly at her. He looked up and saw us. Before I could shout, he leaned over and kissed Marsha on the lips.

For a moment, it looked like a normal teenage kiss. She stood on tiptoe to better reach his lips, and he wrapped his arms around her shoulders. Then, as her hair started to bleach, she began to struggle, to realise that he was draining all the life energy from her.

Alek let the drained body fall. What was left of Marsha crumbled as it hit the ground.

Before the other creatures could attack, I ran forward to tackle Alek. He continued to smile as he leapt aside. He span into a kick that caught my back and I stumbled down. What the cruk was I thinking? Why hadn't I fled? I reflexively shoulder-rolled as I hit the ground, coming back to my feet next to Kash. That's why I was fighting. I still had one student to protect. One kid who'd followed me into this 'because it would be fun'. I grabbed him by the shoulder.

'Kash! Kash? You OK? Can you move?'

'What? Yes... I-I-I...'

'Good.' I hauled him to his feet and made sure I had a firm grip on his arm. 'We need to get out of here.'

I shoved him to one side as Alek glided back towards us. Kash was stumbling but I pushed him on. I knew there were shouts and screams

around us, and there were people fighting. A glimpse of Ruby, red and bouncing off a wall into a flying dive which ended as her out-flung dagger sliced into an attacker. Ren holding onto a twisting creature's neck. But all I wanted was out. To get the one person here I was responsible for to safety.

'Benny! Down!' Ruby yelled, and we ducked as something flew from the alley's mouth and struck Alek in the chest. More Badblooders were pouring into the square. They leapt and clashed with the creatures. Kash and I dragged one another over to the shelter of a doorway and watched the melee.

It was obvious that the creatures had the superior skills: they span and leapt, kicked and chopped, punched and ducked. But the locals had numbers on their side. They were working as a group, tag-teaming to get a creature pinned down so they could thrust the dagger deep into the neck.

I risked leaning out of the doorway, to see if we could run for the alleys and the safety of our rooms.

'Bernice Summerfield,' Alek murmured in my ear, 'aren't you wondering who invited us in?'

His voice, that close and that shiver-inducingly seductive, made me freeze. His breath on my neck was cool, deliberate. One of his hands came up to caress my shoulder, drawing me further out of the doorway. I heard Kash calling me, grabbing at my arm, but the whispered song Alek was singing was overwhelming me. I wanted to turn around, surrender to his kiss.

No, no way. He's like, sixteen.

I shoved my elbow backwards, catching him in the gut before he could leap away. He snarled, revealing sharpened teeth. I cast about on the ground, trying to find something to use as a weapon. As he rushed at me. I desperately threw out a left punch, hoping to use his own momentum to crush his windpipe.

Obviously, I'd forgotten they don't need to breathe. He bore down on me, so we crashed to the ground. I tried to scramble free of his weight, my trapped arms flailing at his chest. He stilled, staring at me. Then exploded into dust.

In my right hand, I held the piece of wood I'd found on the ground and onto which Alek had impaled himself. It was kind of hard to believe it had just happened.

'Benny?' Ren appeared above me, his eyes scanning my neck first, then locking onto mine. He scooped me up into a hug, holding me close enough to constrict my breathing. 'You're OK?' he asked. At my nod, he drew back and looked at my face. He ran a thumb across my cheeks and I realised I was crying.

Death and the Maiden

I left the last column with me cradled in Ren's arms, crying. He tucked my head against my chest and rocked me gently, then raised us to our feet. The square had been cleared of creatures, and exhausted Badblooders were kneeling in the dust. Someone had found the manual winch and was raising the ramp again. Although, if they can fly, why bother?

Ren walked me back to the hotel, Yuki following with Kash. In every street, the shutters were closed but lights were being erected and connected at the corners to drive out the shadows. The locals were walking around in groups, watchful and cautious. Older people, still supple from years of practise but no longer part of the defence plans, stood in doorways, watching and offering advice to the younger generations. As we passed one, the one woman stared at us, then pointed.

'It's you that have brought the cursed down upon us! You off-worlders... Hunanzun has been safe these three centuries till you came here. And now our children are dying because of you!' She spat at us and made a gesture I didn't know but whose meaning was clear.

It was hard to argue with her, in a way. Since we'd started digging, three local students were dead, as was one of mine. It didn't seem fair that it was all the young ones. The ones with so much energy, so much vitality. Of course, that's what the creatures lived on so those kids were always at the greatest risk. But I still found it hard to disagree with the old woman.

The owner of the hotel, at least, was relieved to see us, and — after checking none of us were infected — insisted that we have some wine and go to our rooms. He and his staff would defend the building, if it came to it. When Ren suggested that he stay with me for the night, I didn't reject his offer but let him follow me into his room and lock the door. With the

power out, he lit the emergency candles, checked the shutters and poured me some wine.

We slept in each other's arms, albeit dressed and above the covers. Even if I had felt anything even remotely romantic at that moment, I was too exhausted to bother with any of that.

Dawn came naturally, as the planet turned and the settlement saw the sun rise. With the dawn came help: rescue vehicles that had edged along the transverse tracks and driven on the edge of the darkness in order to arrive first and see what had happened to Hunanzun. Behind them, slower and more cautiously, came the nearest settlement. With the all clear given, Dongjiang hooked up and pushed Hunanzun along. After a couple of hours, the problem with the power was found and fixed.

'Someone had sabotaged it,' Ruby said with horror.

We were sat in the tea-house, settling peppermint tea before us. My nerves were so shot that I was crying out for caffeine or alcohol but Ren insisted that I needed something more calming. I'm hoping he doesn't think last night signified anything other than shock. I mean, I'd like him to think it meant more, but right now seems like a crazy time to even consider it.

'It was Marsha,' Kash said. He was looking drawn, with shadows under his eyes which he'd not bothered to hide with his sunglasses. The way he sat suggested he was just barely keeping his emotions in check. I'd never seem him without a smile before, and it made him look older.

'Marsha? But...'

'We went to her family's house for dinner. She vanished for an hour or so, saying she had errands, and her parents and little sister were interested in talking to us about offworld life. Seemed innocuous enough, but when we came outside later, the ramp was down and she looked pleased when Alek came through it. You know how much she wanted his attention.'

That must have been what she was doing at the dig site yesterday: When she scuffed over the ground, she must have been hiding a note to Alek. A note betraying the settlement just so she could get lip time with a creature that no longer cared about her at all.

In terms of the dig, there's no way we can get back there today to finish off and restore the site. The pilots are pushing to get Hunanzun back into alignment with the other settlements, so it's safely in the centre of the day side of the planet again. And tomorrow we were due to ship out anyway. Ruby agreed that the priority for today should be for me to catalogue the remaining artefacts stacked up in my room, and she'd resolve restoring the site to its pre-dig state after we'd gone.

I wish the dig hadn't ended up with so many dead or grieving. As well as needing to make sure Kash is alright, I had to contact Bobby's family and give them the news. Yuki rigged up a way of sending a message over the portarep which won't be automatically filed in the HTP newsfeed but will be privately routed to his family. We sent it last night, but with no

way of receiving a fast response from HTP, we've no way of knowing if it worked.

A Farewell to Arms

And that's the end of that.

The shuttle arrived this morning, and we've just broken the gravity well of Badblood. Just a couple of days on the space station and we all go our separate ways. Which is something Ren and I did not do last night.

Yesterday, our last full day, was spent in my room. There were a dozen boxes of artefacts from the site still to catalogue, including all the grave goods. With only one catscanner, we all took turns capturing the information for my dig notes and then reboxing it to hand over to Ruby. As there wasn't enough room for all of us in my place, especially with all the uncatalogued boxes, we all also took turns to take a final walk around the settlement. Yuki vanished for a couple of hours with her old-fashioned camera, taking shots of the shop-owners and driving out with one of the buses to get capture the farmers being brought back in from the fields.

As dinner time approached, Ruby insisted that we go with her to the teahouse in the main square. I wanted to keep working, but Allyn pointed out that I'd need the food as fuel. The tea house was as full and noisy as usual, yet when we walked in a table was cleared for us and a hush fell. As the waiting staff brought over our favourite dishes of the last two weeks, the owner himself stood on a stool and clapped his hands.

'My friends, tonight we will be saying farewell to our off-world visitors. I know that some thought that they brought the bad luck with them and called the curse onto our settlement...' There were mutterings at that, which made me wonder how quickly we could get out of the building. We could always leap through the windows. 'But,' the owner continued, 'they too have suffered great loss and sorrow at the hands of the cursed, and I wish to apologise on behalf of all of us for the distress caused.'

I glanced at Kash but he was looking away, towards nothing in

particular. As the applause and cheering died away, I stood. I didn't like making serious speeches, or raising grim thoughts, but I knew this was not the time to be flippant.

'I want to thank you, all of you — and Ruby, and Will and Oliver and all the others who have welcomed us to Badblood. I wish the people we have lost could be here tonight but, in their absence, I'd like to raise a toast to them. To Becka, Will, Alek, Marsha and to Bobby.'

Amid the chorus of toasts, I caught Ruby's eye and she nodded. I'd done well. After that, more food and wine arrived and a lot of much sillier toasts were raised. Somewhat later, as people split into smaller groups in order to concentrate on following drunken conversation, I found myself and Ren cosied up together at the end of the table. He poured us both a glass of wine, and raised his.

'To Bernice Summerfield,' he said quietly, 'who led us with bravery, her wits and her very cute nose.'

He touched his finger to my nose. I blushed and wondered how I could accept such a toast. Before I could think about the right etiquette, he had taken my hand in his and was rubbing his thumb gentle over mine.

'Benny, I know the time was never right, and you had your position to maintain —'

'If I could maintain that positi—'

'But I'd rather like to go back to your room now. With you. And take you to bed.'

Oh. Right, then.

So we slipped unobtrusively out — aside from Kash shouting 'go on, my girl!' at me — and giggled our way back to the hotel like teenagers.

What, you think I'm going to give you more detail? His mum might be reading this. Suffice to say, Mrs Moreau, your son is very thoughtful, talented and hawt. Also, his arse is just the right size for getting a firm grip on.

At breakfast this morning, there were lots of coughs which might have been hiding laughter from Kash and Yuki, although Allyn appeared totally unaware. Ren had suggested I go to breakfast first, to make it less obvious. But it's hard to hide the glow that comes from a really good night in and I think everyone knew. Yuki even winked and mouthed 'tell me everything' over the fruit juice.

After breakfast, I signed over the manifests of the artefact boxes to Ruby and officially handed the dig site back to her. She hugged me, then stepped back to give me a formal bow.

'I hope your return home is a safe one, and that, when the embargo is fully lifted from us, we can speak again.'

I gave her another hug and offered her my hand. 'You can count on it, Ruby Woo.'

And then we were off to the small spaceport, and now we're heading into the space station.

There's two more nights before the next liner departs for Earth, and another few hours after that before Kash and I head back to the university.

I know how I'm planning to spend the time.

Sex and the CT1107

Quarantine was incredibly dull.

As the first people to have spent any time outside the sealed confines of the spaceport on Badblood, we had to go through it, and a debrief. Given that the Earth authorities cut off contact due to what is still listed as a biohazard, it's understandable that they're a bit cautious about letting us back on-board the station.

The pilot had stayed within her hermetically sealed cabin the whole time the shuttle was on Badblood, so after docking she was able to wave us goodbye and head off to the pilots' lounge. We, however, got 24 hours of sheer boredom stuck in a sealed suite.

There were basic facilities: a shared room with pack rations in a food prep area and a couple of dorm rooms sleeping six. The bunks were wide and strong enough to support the majority of body shapes — human and alien — likely to wind up stuck here. No showers: we'd gone through a thorough scrub on the way into the suite. So thorough that my skin was still smarting. All our clothes had been taken to be treated and we'd been issued plain white towelling robes and slippers. Our personal possessions were taken for checking as well, so all we had was an entertainment system which had some outdated movies, an e-book which contained — according to Allyn — the worst novels of Daphne Styal Twisk, and allegedly soothing soundtracks of spacewhales cooing to each other. It was worse than waiting in for a delivery droid, as you couldn't even say 'stuff this', stick a note on the door and nip down the shops instead.

The joys of the entertainment system were on hold anyway, as we all had to take turns in the last room of the suite: the debrief.

I sat on one side of a transparent barrier, whilst the station's psychologist and a dull looking man in a military suit — who neglected to introduce

himself— sat on the other. They had print-offs of my columns, which was potentially embarrassing. I hope they didn't read them out to the others. Perhaps it's my military school background, or the fact it's taken me years to even get to be a visiting tutor, but something about the set-up instantly made me think I was about to be caught out or told off. I know, paranoid much?

Instead, the military man asked me lots of questions. Had I really not seen any projective weapons on Badblood? Surely, based on what the curse did, they'd want to avoid close-up fighting? Was light the key to defeating the creatures? How much arable land was currently unused due to the 'curse'? The psychologist's questions were less direct but I still felt the focus was on Badblood rather than me. How did they react to the arrival of off-worlders? How did their reactions make me feel? Were there communications problems? What was their response to being under attack? Had we parted on good terms?

I answered it all as briefly as I could without being rude, and trying to remember what I'd said in these columns. I'd been as honest as I could be whilst writing them. Was I, in fact, a bad columnist? Had I missed all these things they were asking about, or was it something else? Maybe Yuki had been right about the Kikan's motives for co-sponsoring the expedition, as well. This wasn't about bringing a lost colony back under the Earth Empire's wing, it was about exploiting it. After a fortnight immersed with the Badblooders, I was a little disappointed to find 'the real world' so harsh.

Back in the shared room, I felt suddenly drained. The debrief had reminded me how many people had died and how I — we — had been running on adrenaline for so long. The shuttle journey back to Sandinista would be fairly short, and easy to sleep on, but it still seemed suddenly epic. I'd not be back in my own bed for another week yet, and all I really wanted was to bury myself under the covers and sleep. And, even, when I get back there, I'll still have to deal with the aftermath of the expedition: writing to Bobby's parents, filling in gods' know how many insurance forms for the college, producing a formal report on the dig.

Ren gently nudged my leg under the table, although I'm fairly sure there's no need for us to be acting clandestinely any more. My falling asleep, snoring, on his shoulder on the shuttle back up to CT1107 was probably a bit of a giveaway. He grinned when I looked up.

'There are a couple of days before you leave, yes? Then when we clear this dump, let me take you to Amuse Bouche on level 2 for a meal. Just the two of us.'

Despite the antiseptic surroundings and my blue mood, I felt my stomach tingle. It was either at the thought of a romantic meal with a handsome younger (by four years) man, or the thought of real food.

Twenty hours later and I'm sitting at the bar at Amuse Bouche, writing

this. The low romantic lighting is just right. The martini olive is suitably gin-soaked, the bar nibbles are suitably salty in order to prompt more drink-buying. Everything you could ask for a romantic seduction over the main course is in place.

Everything but the boy.

I'm feeling somewhat idiotic.

We got our clothes back when we were cleared and released from quarantine. So I went shopping for something to wear with the silk top Ruby had given me. I took Yuki along and she convinced me to buy a sassy little dark blue mini-kilt. I stuck with my boots, despite Yuki's best attempts to get me into something more flimsy. After all we've been through, I'm sticking to my boots from now on. I even automatically slotted the dagger back in before leaving for the restaurant. Unless the steak is particularly tough, I can't see much need for it any more: I just feel happier with it there.

So now I'm perched on a high stool and wondering exactly when the mutton rule kicks in? Am I now, at 25 and suddenly conscious of my thighs, too old for mini-kilts? I'm avoiding the thing I should really be thinking about, obviously. How long should a girl wait if she suspects she's been stood up? Leave too early and you risk missing someone who was genuinely delayed and thus become the stand-upper instead of the stand-ee. Leave it too late and you'll be eliciting pity not only from the waiting staff but also the other diners. Luckily, I have HTP's portarep to ensure I'm not looking lost and glancing around each time someone comes in the door. I have already laid the groundwork for leaving by pointedly checking the time a few minutes ago.

I'm still avoiding the real question (although not the gin, as Carlos just brought me another martini). *Where the hell is he?*

I'm downing this one and going back to my room. Screw him.

I wish.

Murder on the Dancefloor

Back in my dorm room, I flopped onto the futon and finished off the previous column, resisting the temptation to say mean things about Ren. I knew that he and I were only ever a passing thing: a fun indulgence before we went on our ways. And that's great: I'm not mad on that whole OTP business anyway. I struggle to be responsible for myself so having someone else around all the time, who you always have to consider and consult, seems crazy. Still, I'd thought we'd spend these couple of nights on the station together without any analysis because, well, why not?

And yet his failure to show hurt more than it should. Why did he ask me out if he was going to blow me off? And if he'd really wanted to avoid another evening with me, he could have said he was washing his hair and saved me the embarrassment...

Or maybe something had happened? Maybe, I thought, I should go over and check?

A discreet beep poked at my ears. Something in my room wanted my attention, at least.

The noise was coming from my portarep. The low battery light was blinking, which was a first the whole time I'd had it. I tried to ignore it for a few minutes but it was too insistent. Then I tried switching it off, but couldn't find out how to mute it (HTP developers take note — you don't want tired journos throwing the thing against the wall when they can't get to sleep because of a low battery). In the process of pressing buttons, the screen popped out and I saw there was a new file listed on the front screen. A file I'd not written.

Curious, I opened it. Seems Oliver really is a good mechanic as he'd hacked the portarep we'd left with the Badblooders by ****details deleted by

copyright: autoblogger***

So Ruby had managed to send a private message directly to me rather than via HTP.

Benny: The crystal is missing. It was on the manifest list but the box contains *a same weight pebble*. Pls return *somehow*: *graue goods* must stay on Badblood.

My suspicions immediately fell on the Kikan men. Given the way he had been acting the whole time we were down on Badblood — acting like an old school colonial type — and given that Ren had betrayed no interest in the crystal, I decided to go and find Allyn. The fortnightly shuttle service to Badblood was due to start flying in a couple of weeks: if I could recover the crystal then I could entrust it to a pilot to take it back to Ruby.

Grabbing my bag, I hurried towards the Kikan men's rooms down on level 5. To get to their dorm arm, I had to go past the main hub on 5, where all the restaurants and bars are. Emerging from the lift, I found total chaos.

'Please, miss, go back to your dorm.' There were securi-guards hurrying about the place with their visors down, and one of them was right in my face.

'What's going on?'

'Miss, go back to your dorm and wait for the all clear.'

I saw a couple of medi-haz bunnies running into Gunabara's. They were fully suited up, hoods up and visors down.

'Kind of an extreme reaction,' I tried, 'given the food's not actually that bad.'

'Miss, I'm going to have to ask you to return to your dorm or face extreme vio—'

'Benny! Summerfield! Let her through, man, let her through!'

The securi-guard snapped to attention at Allyn's command, letting me get past. Allyn had lost his jacket and was looking far more authoritative than I'd even seen before. Those securi-guards who weren't directing people back to their dorms were looking to him for direction. He's a Kikan man, I remembered, and they are respected for a reason.

'Get a containment field around this level now. Make sure the ventilation system is isolated. Has someone shut down all traffic into and out of the station?'

'Sir, yes, sir!'

'Good job. Are any incoming shuttles going to do a Houston on us?'

'No, sir. All the ones who were in real space have enough juice left to jump on to Sebastian instead. It'll add days to people's journeys.'

'Tell 'em to find some lawyers willing to sue the Kikan. Benny...'

He took me over to one side, as the securi-guards started muttering orders into their headsets.

'It got out. The curse of Badblood came back with us.'

'But...that's impossible. We took every precaution. Nothing came off-world that we hadn't taken down there to start with, or which hadn't been blasted through the quarantine process. Could the quarantine have failed?'

'Every bit of kit, and ourselves, was subject to it. It's unthinkable. I know we're not dealing with the traditional organic curse the Kikan have fought down the millennia. There's no blood, no organic matter transference. So maybe somehow we didn't pick it up, but it's here.'

Inside the Gunabara karaoke bar, I could glimpse overturned tables and chairs, ripped upholstery and broken glass. At one table, four bags with very expensive but curiously tacky embroidery sat like unwanted junk at a clearance sale. And the dust. So much dust. It was still in the shapes of the victims, and the medi-haz bunnies were treading slowly and carefully through it.

'Did anyone get converted?' I asked.

'I don't know. The details of who was in the bar haven't been confirmed yet, and I've a couple of grunts checking over the CC footage for any evidence of anyone walking out alive.'

I thought for a moment. The echo of that singing haunted me.

'And nothing could have been aboard the shuttle?'

'Nothing was detected, but it's in triage one lockdown now, and I've a team going over it. They're a bit makeshift, like you might expect this far from Earth, but I've made them understand the consequences of overlooking anything.'

I just bet he had. I can't say I liked this new aspect of Allyn, but at least he was being open in his authoritarian attitude now instead of masking it. He'd been so curiously inept as the impatient scholar.

'So what do you need me to do?' I asked.

'Go and find Ren. I'm sure you know where his dorm is, and he's not answered my call.'

All the doors in the dorm corridor were closed, the indicators showing they were occupied. People were clearly taking the securi-guards' orders seriously. Ren's room, when I reached it, had a light glowing to indicate there was someone in. I tried the normal bell, then started to bang on the door with the side of my fist.

I still wasn't sure if he actually wanted to see me tonight but it wasn't a case of wants anymore. With one or more creatures on a rampage, it was a need. Really, I'd have liked to have had Ruby or some of the other highly trained fighters from Badblood here. The securi-guards in their armour would be slower than an attacking creature. It might not be able to touch their skin and drain them of energy, but it would easily evade them and get into the dorm corridors. And start to sing. And the people in their dorm rooms, unaware of the danger of it, would follow the song. They'd line up, hypnotised, for their own massacre as they had done in Gunabara's.

`Ren?'

The door clicked open. Inside, Ren was lying on the bed, with his arm over his eyes. He looked pale, and didn't acknowledge me when I stepped into the room. If it hadn't been for his chest rising and falling, I might have thought he was dead. Only the reading lamp above him was lit, casting him into the light. He looked like an old painting, but I couldn't remember the name of it.

`Benny?' He answered, his voice as light and musical as ever, but he didn't move.

`Look, I don't know why things are suddenly awkward between us, but we've got a bigger problem. A creature's come with us: there was a massacre at Gunabara's. Allyn sent me to find you as we need as many knowledgeable hands as possible.'

I ventured across the space, noticing that the contents of his bags were strewn on the floor, and sat tentatively on the edge of the bed.

`Are you OK?' I asked.

He opened his eyes and sat up, his hand clamping over mine.

`I feel more alive than I ever have before.'

Even in the low light I could see that his eyes were red. His hand over mine was cold but crackled with energy. He might be feeling it, but he wasn't alive. How?

He'd gone through quarantine, same as the rest of us. He'd been fine after the assault on Hunanzun, the last time we'd encountered the creatures and so the last time he had been exposed to any risk.

`Benny! It's amazing. I'd always wondered, you see. When my father would come back from his Kikan missions, so tired and yet so buzzing with life, I wanted to know how that kind of thrill felt. I had to know.'

I tried to pull back, but his hand — and his eyes — held me fast. When he leaned closer, closing his eyes to whisper in my ear, I had to fight the urge to close my eyes in reflex to his closeness. He didn't *feel* dead. He felt tense, almost vibrating, as he had done before he kissed me for the first time. Crackling with pent-up energy.

`Never grow old, Benny, never die... so many new sensations. Such power and strength. I can feel the energy flowing along every part of me. Every part.'

The energy drained from those poor corpses back in that bar. 'Energy that you stole...that you killed for...'

`Is it stealing, when it is offered willingly? Every one of them agreed in the end.'

So it had been him then. On the plus side, it meant we were only dealing with one creature. On the negative, it was Ren and I was pinned to the bed by him.

`But, Benny, you'll see how simple it is. If you agree, I'd not drain you. We could have fun together forever.'

And there I'd been thinking he didn't even want to stay for a weekend.

I had to resist. He might look and feel like Ren, speak like Ren but it wasn't him next to me anymore. It was the creature that inhabited his form and also wanted to inhabit mine.

And I was finding it harder than expected to resist. With Alek, I'd been repulsed by the idea, but Ren...I knew some of what Ren was promising. I'd tasted what it was like to kiss him, to feel his skin melding against mine, and to feel that surge of energy he'd wrought in me. I wanted to kiss him, to feel that alive again. But I knew, with some clear rational part of me, that it would kill me.

I wasn't going to go for that.

'How did this happen?' I asked, desperate to keep him talking and avoid any urge to kiss him. That would be life-ending, one way or another. He shrugged, and raised his free hand to brush my cheek.

'Does it matter?'

'Yes.' I could feel his cool breath, tinged with a taste of iron, against my face. Only a few more centimetres and I would be another pile of dust. Or worse, dead like him.

I brought my free arm up in a roundhouse punch, slamming my knuckles into his temple. Even as he recovered — far faster than any normal human would — his hand began to crush the one of mine he held trapped to the bed. I leaned back, got a knee up and kicked him in the stomach. As he jerked, I ripped my hand free and fell backwards, landing on the floor. I scrambled backwards, my boots struggling for purchase on the abandoned clothes, towards the dorm room door. Ren swooped towards me.

'Benny, please...'

Against my will, he took hold of my arms and raised me up onto my feet, holding me as close as he had those evenings in Hunanzun. He looked so normal: only the eyes gave it away. Unlike the teenagers Becka and Alek, he seemed able to control his lust for energy, to be able to think and reason more clearly. He still had Ren's memories, his speech patterns, his mannerisms, but he wasn't the Ren I had known.

'Ren? I'm sorry.'

He looked puzzled, then furious, as I plunged the dagger Ruby had gifted me into his chest, pushing up past the breastbone.

He exploded into dust.

I slid down the door, gagging. Partially from the dust but mostly from the urge I had to be sick. I had just killed a man.

Okay, so the creatures had done that when they converted him, but I had been the one to cause all those memories and personality traits to disappear forever.

I brushed my face with the backs of my hands, smearing aside tears and snot. Standing, I felt something small and hard beneath my heel, and heard a crack as it broke under my weight. Stepping aside, the crushed remains of the missing crystal lay on the floor.

...Wave Goodbye

Gosh. I've just reread my last column on the feed and I must admit, I didn't expect everything to make it to the finished piece. It just sort of splurged out and I wasn't in the mood to self-edit. I thought the sub would cut half of it.

They've asked me for one last column, but there's not much else to tell. Yes, there are explanations, but not necessarily the ones you or I want. The mess on level 5 was being cleared away when I walked back over. Allyn saw me and asked where Ren was. It was hard to know where to start. I held out the broken crystal instead.

'It came with us in this.'

Allyn looked confused and, with no-one who could know or understand quite how I felt, I closed my eyes and felt myself sway.

'I need to sit down,' I said, shocked at the feebleness of my voice.

At that, the old solicitous and faintly patronising Allyn was back. He led me over to the nearest bench and sat me down. One of the security guards came over with a glass of water. Thankfully from one of the other restaurants on the concourse.

It took me what seemed like forever to tell Allyn what had happened in Ren's room, even though there was so little factual to tell. I badly wanted to be telling it to Yuki instead — with a strict injunction that she not spill the beans before the book rights are sold, obviously — because I knew she could hear all the sad girly stuff as well. Whereas I somehow suspected Allyn wouldn't understand my guilt at it all. He'd been ruthless each time we'd been faced with them. The friends we'd seen infected became creatures: it instead of she, something to be put down as swiftly as possible. How could I tell him how alluring Ren had been, how much

I'd wanted to give in? Yet... that's what people like Allyn, with their simple black and white ideas, need to understand.

So I told him the dry facts, and I showed him the crystal and explained that Ruby had got a message to me that it was missing.

'Fascinating,' Allyn said. 'The crystal must carry a small energy charge — Ruby referred to it as being able to carry a memory and that requires an electrical pulse to pattern the matrice — so it's entirely plausible that a creature was able to secrete itself within a crystal and was thus transported.'

'And Ren touched the crystal with his bare flesh, took it from its sterili bag...

'... and the creature latched onto him as the means to acquire more energy.

Why, though? Why had Ren taken the crystal at all? I had to assume what he had told me — or what the creature had claimed through him — was true: he'd always been fascinated. He'd always wanted to know what it was like. So he'd guessed that the strange crystal within the strange burial was a key and he'd turned it. And it had turned him.

'That grave — the child's — it wasn't a child, was it?' I asked.

Allyn shook his head.

'I don't think so. I think those first settlers, even as they were besieged and taking to their heels, wanted to bury the remains of their own properly. Even if that meant burying dust and memories instead of anything real.'

I looked up and saw the medi-haz bunnies were finishing their work clearing up the bar. Small bags containing the remains the quicki-DNA taggers had said were different people. Marked with question marks and destined to sit in a medi-haz box for a year in case of claimant, or to be destroyed utterly. I wasn't sure those early Badblooders had done the wrong thing.

I let Allyn take the remains of the crystal and went back to my room. To write. To try to make sense of things.

This morning, Yuki came by first thing. Of course, word had got around the station and I expected her to be curious. Or maybe cross, given this had all been a PR exercise for HTP and, whilst all the equipment kept working the whole way through it, they might not be too happy to have their name associated with the whole business. Instead, she hugged me and asked if I was alright.

It's the question, I realised then, that Allyn had never asked.

As I cried into her shoulder, I knew that — despite everything, because of everything — I had made a friend. Maybe we will be telling stories about this one day in the future. But not today.

Perhaps you got more than you bargained for when you started reading this column. Maybe not. Well, I hope you got something out of it.

This is Bernice Summerfield, signing off.

Possum Kingdom

Kelly Hale

'The origins of the vampire myth lie in the mystery cults of oriental civilizations..... The Nepalese Lord of Death, The Tibetan Devil, and the Mongolian God of Time.'

Devandra P. Varma — THE VAMPIRE IN MYTH, LEGEND, AND LORE

'There is evidence to suggest that the vampire emerged at one time and place, and then diffused around the world from that primal source.'

J Gordon Melton — THE VAMPIRE BOOK: ENCYCLOPAEDIA OF THE UNDEAD

-O-O-O-

'Every human culture (and several not-human) has at least one myth involving blood-sucking demons. Each culture has its own unique remedies, cures, or apotropaics intended to inhibit or ward off these

demons, but there are a few consistent and basic commonalities in all the lore. One is: Never invite a vampire into your home (or your universe). They're like those bad roommates at university, except instead of eating all your peanut butter they eat all your friends.'

Sojourner Rabinowitz-Walsh Damon — VAMPIRE HUNTING FOR FUN AND PROFIT

-O-O-O-

'There's an animated cartoon from mid 20th century Earth in which two clever mice named Pixie and Dixie escape from the resident housecat Mr Jinx by means of a pocket universe — one kept literally in the pocket of a mouse (although, as both mice were naked save for a bowtie on one and a shirt collar on the other, where they kept pockets, let alone a pocket universe, was a great mystery blithely surrendered to the requisite suspension of disbelief.) That the mice were cleverer than the cat goes without saying, given the popular tropes prevalent in this period of animated entertainment, but these mice were extraordinarily clever for mid-20th century cartoon mice. They were capable of creating a cosy mouse hole (complete with furnishings) simply by pulling the hole out of an invisible pocket, slapping it on a wall, and leaping into it. After facilitating their escape from Mr Jinx, (usually with a stolen wedge of cheese, sometimes with sandwiches or entire roasted turkeys!) one of the mice would reach out, grab the edge of the hole and pull it in after him. Suffice it to say the mice never liked to lose track of that mouse hole. I mean, one shudders to think of what a cat that got his claws on a pocket universe might do.'

**Bernice Summerfield — ORIGINS OF DARK MATTER THEORIES
(citations go here)**

Possum Kingdom Lake, Texas
2565

High in the cliff sides of Hell's Gate on Possum Kingdom Lake there are holes in the rock that the Comanche once claimed were gateways between their world and that of the demon races, Napesht and Utlunta. There were places like this all over the American west, from the Dakota Badlands to the Gulf of Mexico. Some of these sites were the actual cliff dwellings left by people who'd been driven out by aggressors or aggressive weather patterns or both. The Pueblo Indians remembered those earliest cliff dwellers in their oral histories as late as the 1880s. But even they admitted that some of these places had never housed living people, only spirits... of one kind or another.

The Lakota Sioux told stories of similar demons, as did the Cherokee and Navaho, but it was the Comanche tales that really ticked Bernice Summerfield's ticky box when she'd first come across them. She'd even jotted down a few notes for one of those 'someday' papers she intended to write when she was too ancient and arthritic to crawl into the holes herself.

Before those famous horsemen of the Great American Desert even had horses, the Comanche had stories about the caves high up in the sides of mountains and cliffs, stories of demons whose portals could open and close in the face of the rock like a winking eye or the flap of a tipi, blood-sucking demons that could swim through rock like they were swimming through water. These demons were said to be capable of manipulating men and women alike with their charms. They drank the life blood of the men and stole the life-giving force from the women, supposedly making them bear demon children who also needed to drink blood, but would walk the earth forever. In short: Vampires.

It's important to keep in mind that the Comanche people were not exactly humble in their approach to the spirit world. They weren't terribly superstitious, and, unlike the Sioux, tended not to feel particularly awed or intimidated by the doings and goings on of the Great Spirit. In fact, the Comanche people appeared to feel very little harmony with the natural world around them. The world didn't drop food in a man's lap after all. It didn't throw clothes over his body or magically provide shelter from the elements. No, if a Comanche wanted something he had to wrestle it away from the thing that had it. That isn't to say that he didn't pray — or beg or offer tempting bribes to gain puha of the wolf, or 'eagle medicine' or to acquire a bit of the mountain lion's hunting prowess, but clearly, to a Comanche warrior that kind of spirituality had nothing to do with morals or ethics or even the social rules of human interaction. Comanche religion was absolutely utilitarian and was, at its essence, 'How do I sneak up on this deer and kill it? How does the wolf do it? How does a mountain lion?'

If he managed to wrest this knowledge away from the creature that had it, he wasn't about to tell anyone else how. That was strictly between him and the puha. It came with certain agreements, obligations, and taboos. For the very power that could give him medicine to fell a deer with a single arrow, or steal a hundred horses from under the noses of sleeping soldiers, was the same power that could destroy him. It was a tricky balancing act. Every Comanche knew that Once he attained powerful medicine he was in constant danger of offending the spirits that had made him so powerful in the first place, spirits that would cheerfully strip him of all the control he'd gained, and leave him a naked, starving laughingstock of the community.

And so, the stories the Comanche told of how the Nepesht and Utlunta came into our universe, were not cautionary tales, not about the pitfalls of trying to gain and use negative power. Rather, as Bernice discovered, they were about what precautions to take if you were brave enough or crazy enough to actually get the power and use it.

The Story of How Nepesht Came into the World

Tse-naha had n0 luck in hunting f0r many years. He and his wife had nothing at all t0 eat but what she gathered — r0ots and 0ats and berries. It was a p0or diet with n0 meat and the old women all said this was why they had n0 children after s0 long. His wife grew thin and gaunt. Her 0nce beautiful hair hung lank. She wept in silence. Tse-naha was desperate. He could n0t catch even a rabbit t0 eat. He went t0 the high cliffs to seek puha fr0m the hawk. (Hawks being good at catching rabbits presumably?) He had t0 climb very high and perch 0n a ledge. While he was watching f0r the moment to steal the hawk's medicine, he was beset by a thunder0us s0und that ripped the air like a sharp blade through

buffalo hide. It was a sound both inside and outside his head, a sound that rattled his bones and knocked his teeth together, and nearly sent him tumbling from his perch to the river below. (Huh, oddly familiar, that. I wonder...?)

When the sound stopped he saw that a cave had appeared in the face of the rock. (WTF?) Curious, he looked inside and realized it was not a cave at all, but a passage, beyond which there seemed to be another world entirely. (WTF infinity!) One lit by a blue sun, strange and painful to gaze upon, strangely beautiful. (Ah. OK. Never mind then.)

Suddenly a spirit appeared before him. The spirit looked like a warrior. He had a breastplate made of bones and shells and polished stones. He wore on his head the head of a fearsome creature Tse-naha had never seen before.

'Who are you?' Tse-naha asked.

'I am Nepesht,' the spirit said, 'the greatest hunter of my world.'

Tse-naha was surprised the spirit had answered so quickly, and wondered that a spirit could have so little guile or caution when dealing with strangers.

'That is quite a claim,' Tse-naha said. 'And how do you hunt with no bow and arrows, no lance and no knife?'

'My teeth are my arrows, my tongue is my knife. My very thoughts will cause the beast to lie down and offer its life to me.'

This seemed a useful power to have. (Quite.) Tse-naha wondered how he might take some of it for himself. 'A great claim with no proof,' he said. 'Anyone could claim such power from inside the safety of a cave.' Tse-naha pointed to a white-tailed deer on the other side of the river. 'Can you kill that deer with an arrow from your mind?'

Nepesht looked at the deer and the deer fell dead. (Wonder if this was originally a rabbit? Works better thematically. Probably a threefold theme too. First a rabbit then bigger prey. Deer? Bear?) 'I hold power over all the beasts and all men and all women,' he said. 'I can make you the greatest hunter that ever was, greater than the wolf, eagle, mountain lion, bear, and hawk combined. You will have a hundred horses and your wife will bear many sons and daughters. I can grant you this power.'

Tse-naha thought hard on this. 'What would you ask of me in return?'

'Only say that I may cross into your world.'

Tse-naha wondered how it would be to kill a deer with just a thought. He wondered if it could be skinned and dressed and cooked with mere thoughts as well. This was truly a miraculous power. How could it not be good? (Well, Tse-naha is doomed, isn't

he?) Still... 'Why d0 you need my permission? If y0u can kill a deer fr0m within the cave, you c0uld kill anything.' Including me, th0ught Tse-naha.

'But I cannot eat it. I am here and the deer is still 0n the 0ther side 0f the river.'

Tse-naha knew that spirits c0uld be tricky. 'Is that the taboo y0u will imp0se 0n me? That I will be a great hunter but unable to eat what I kill?'

'I have n0 power t0 impose tabo0s on you, Tse-naha. I cannot cr0ss fr0m my w0rld int0 y0urs unless y0u give me leave.'

Tse-naha l0oked at the spirit Nepesht, his fine clothing and his firm flesh. Nepesht was n0t g0ing hungry that much seemed clear. If Nepesht c0uld n0t enj0y his kill, c0uld Tse-naha claim it as his 0wn? One deer w0uld be f00d for a moon.

And then what?

'Say that I may enter,' Nepesht whispered.

He still had n0 medicine and w0uld be as bad a hunter as ever.

'Say that I may enter y0ur w0rld.'

'You may enter, Nepesht,' Tse-naha said.

N0 s0oner had Tse-naha said this then the spirit of Nepesht left the cave and entered Tse-naha's 0wn flesh, heart, and mind. (Yeah, who didn't see that coming?)

'Ha,' Nepesht cried with Tse-naha's v0ice. 'Now I am here I shall kill all the men, devour all the animals, and have all the women for myself.' Then he reached 0ut, rolled up the wall of the cave, and tucked it into Tse-naha's breechclout. (Whoa.)

Once upon a time before there was a Texas (and for a few hundred years after,) El Rio los Brazos de Dios meandered its way south southeast for seven hundred kilometres thr0ugh every type of landscape Texas was famous for. (In fact, the Brazos River had long featured in popular folksongs during the western expansionist period 0f the United States. This was probably because, at one point in time, the Brazos ran past every single prison in the state of Texas. For s0me reason, prisons in Texas all had barred windows looking out 0ver the river from which a prisoner could gaze and lament over lost freedoms and wasted lives and gals pining away broken-hearted and crying mamas. Undoubtedly, there were even prisons providing guitars and harmonicas for the purpose of rehabilitation, or maybe just to entertain the guards. Anyway...) Suffice it to say the Brazos was a longish river in Texas, not as feisty as the Colorad0 or as r0mantic as the Red, but it had its 0wn unique qualities, and hadn't been named River in the Arms of God by thirsty C0nquistadors for nothing. It flowed (or sometimes trickled) past banks 0f wild roses, wild iris and impenetrable blackberry brambles in the east, through scrub oak and pine groves and flat lands covered with chaparral as it headed south to the Gulf of Mexico. Along the

way, it created a sprawl of creeks, valleys, escarpments, cliffs and mesas. Truly, God's country. And then the dams were built.

Back in the New Deal days of twentieth century America, anything that got the American people working again was rightly viewed as more important than who might have lived on the river a thousand years before. The cliff dwellings in the canyons along the river weren't seen as historically significant. Who cared about a lot of primitives living in caves when there were farms to be ploughed and cattle to graze? One of those dams flooded canyons and lo, Possum Kingdom Lake was created — along with resorts, golf courses, exclusive lakefront properties, boat and water ski rentals, and quaint shops where an angler could buy worms and lures, or putters and nine irons. What had once been a testament to God and nature became a testament to human ingenuity and engineering. Two hundred years later the river was freed, redirected, and repurposed. Such was the way of expanding frontiers, Bernice knew. Another three hundred years and she was in that very place where once had been a mighty dam, a man-made lake, a river in the arms of god. Only archaeologists remembered. She didn't know at the time that she'd be the only one left alive to talk about it fourteen years later.

The survey and excavation was funded by grants from the Palo Pinto County Historical Preservation Society and the Brazos River Authority, with permits from land management and conservation departments and a hand-waved sanction from the President of Texas herself. The team was therefore small and unpaid, except for Dr Ramirez, professor of mesa-Indian studies at Texas A&M University, and his TA, Cooper Fugiro. Two interns, Malia M'Benga and Genji (from Tixus not Texas she always joked) — both well on their way to exciting careers in academia — and Bernice were all getting the benefit of something for their CVs plus all the camp coffee they could drink. Good times.

They had two ancient remote controlled robots, an even more ancient and depressing GPR on a mini caterpillar, lidar, ion spectrometer mounted to a shopping trolley, assorted lab equipment, camping gear, and the aforementioned camp coffee to manage three separate sites on old Possum Kingdom Lake.

It wasn't until a robot fell seventy-five metres inside a cliff wall that any of them knew there were shafts inside the cliff, or that those shafts led to passages that in turn led to a honeycombed network of kiva-shaped cavities beneath the dried lake bed. They didn't know for the simple reason that there hadn't been any such thing in the initial surveys. The land management offices of the President of Texas would be very surprised to learn of them — whenever Dr Ramirez decided to report the discovery, which, they all fervently hoped, wouldn't be anytime in the next few days.

Dr Ramirez had been operating the robot himself when it fell, and Cooper had been studying the images it sent back. The usual stuff you got when you went peeking into the tiny homes of people who'd lived in

the side of a cliff to see if they'd left any bits of pottery lying about. Tons of samples had already been gathered, neatly labelled in neatly labelled boxes. Bernice was the one doing most of the labelling, and although she knew this was an important part of the archaeological experience, she'd hinted over the course of the excavation, several times in fact, just how much more useful she could be doing something — anything — else. The robot's plummet to the centre of the earth seemed like a gift. As soon as the plucky device started sending back sporadic information, Bernice began a well-reasoned argument in favour of guerrilla archaeology.

'Lower me down by cable. All I need is a handheld and we can get tons of pictures to go with the numbers before anyone knows we found something. Good ones too. I take great snaps. Honest. Plus, I've done lots of spelunking. It was on my application, remember?' She was romanticizing the facts a bit, there. Hiding out in caves was a little different from choosing to explore them. Even so — 'I know how to negotiate tunnels without scraping my knees even a little.' She offered Dr Ramirez what she hoped was her most winning smile, and added an eyebrow waggle for good measure.

Ramirez shook his head, though everyone could tell he was considering it. 'I don't know Bernice. We need at least one decent SIMS analysis — we don't know what kinds of gases are present down there that could kill you dead —'

Everyone noticed that for all his cautious talk he wasn't saying no. He was also carefully avoiding the issue of his obligation to contact land management and conservation authorities.

After some discussion they ended up sending the other robot down, by cable first, to snag its fallen comrade and collect more data. The first robot was probably damaged they reasoned; enough so that the stuff it was transmitting could all be nonsense anyway. There had probably been a cave-in as the result of geological drifts, or maybe tremors no one had bothered to tell them about — something.

But what the second one sent back blew everyone away.

The digital images showed what appeared to be smooth-walled caverns made of densely compressed and fused minerals, which, according to gravimetric readings, were remarkably similar to a meteor impact! There were electromagnetic signatures similar to, but not at all like, fired clay. Also, there was a thermal reading in the central cavity, although this appeared to be cooling.

'It's like somebody inserted balloons and inflated them inside the rock.' Fugiro said. 'It even looks kind of balloon-shaped, doesn't it?' He pointed at one of the screens with a birch twig. 'There and there? All that looks a lot like fused glass.' Over his shoulder he asked, 'When was the last geological survey again?'

Behind her, Bernice could hear Malia tapping at a screen. 'Last year around this time.'

He ran a hand through his hair and leaned back from the computer. 'We should get geologists in here. This is something totally geological.'

'But we've got readings for fired clay,' Genji argued. 'That's our department.'

'Come on, Genji, are you seriously trying to justify going down there by claiming those are giant clay pots?'

Genji bit off a surly reply. Literally.

She almost ingested her translator.

Bernice swirled her finger over the area on the screen where thermal imaging showed hotter. 'There's something inside that big one in the centre though. We agree on that, right? There's something in there?'

'It's not mesa-Indian artefacts!'

'How do you know?'

'Don't.' Fugiro pulled his sunglasses down a bit so he could gaze derisively at her over the top of them. 'Just like you don't know it's not a hibernating bear.'

'Yeah!' Malia bounced. 'They reintroduced black bears a few years ago. I remember reading that —'

'There were no caverns under the lake bed last year, Mal,' Bernice reminded her.

'We should call the land management people,' Malia sighed.

'Or those guys from Immigration.' Fugiro added.

'What, you think it's alien?'

'Maybe. Or something to do with alien tech. We can't just go down there, Benny. The Texas government is very, very... territorial. And paranoid. They still execute people.'

'For archaeology?'

'Not yet.'

In the end, Fugiro's Texas paranoia succumbed to his professor's equally dodgy logic. SIMS analysis from the robots showed minimal, tolerable levels of toxic gases and — 'It looks stable,' Ramirez said staring at his own screen like he couldn't quite believe it. Within the hour Bernice was being lowered down a shaft in the side of a cliff, with oxygen mask, helmet torch, collapsible shovel, spade and lantern, specimen containers, communicator, stun baton that might or might not stop a hibernating bear, and a camcorder.

She was only mildly concerned about the possibilities of execution, or bears for that matter, being more concerned about her sweaty hands, and if the shaft was going to get any narrower. The opening in the side of the cliff, with its glimmer of afternoon sunlight, was shrinking to a pinprick above her head. She reached up to flick on the torch and immediately started spinning on the cable.

Someone shouted.

She shouted back, 'Sorry!'

Dark, claustrophobic, sweaty. Oh my. Did she mention dark? And yet,

she could feel something delicious, a frisson of anxiety, some rush in her blood, energy moving from her toes fast, fast, and bursting out the top of her head that screamed — look out! Here comes a discovery! Back then she didn't know what the feeling meant, but she did know (despite a laundry list of insecurities) that her instincts were reliable, and because of that felt free to imagine a future life full of adventure prompted by feelings exactly like this.

At the bottom of the shaft the pile of rubble had conveniently spread out into the first passage in such a way that she only had to shift a few pounds of dirt to get through. After that, both passages and chambers were completely free of rubble. In fact they were practically sterile. It was exactly as Cooper speculated. Smooth-walled chambers seemingly formed by expansion from within, compressing dirt and minerals into these rounded cubbies roughly the shape of a balloon. It was cool, but not damp like every other cave she'd been in. And though it was cool there was a trace of... something, like after a thunderstorm.

The chambers were about the size of a two-person tent and gradually got larger, so that by the time she was nearing the central chamber — or 'bear territory' as Cooper cruelly reminded her — she only had to keep her head low. She dutifully documented her procession with the camcorder and her own amusing commentaries.

'Coming up on the central chamber now. No snoring so far.' In fact all she could hear was the clang of the spade against the shovel on her belt and her own laboured breathing. She took a hit of oxygen.

Bernice thought herself prepared for most things life threw her way (she was younger then) and figured she could cope with a bear (though she was pretty certain she would have smelled it long before she saw it). She was not prepared to find a very-much-alive naked man.

At first her mind wouldn't register the shape on the floor of the central cavern as human. Later, many years later, she considered the possibility that it was because when she first looked at him he wasn't. That was the only way she could justify the lady-like, full-lunged, open-throated scream she let out, because otherwise she'd have to admit that discovering a good-looking naked man was the most terrifying thing she'd ever experienced.

* * *

Nepesht returned to his band wearing the body of Tse-naha. His wife asked if he'd had any luck hunting and he showed her the deer. His wife laughed and wept and laughed again. From that day on she was never hungry. He became the greatest hunter of all the Comanche. But the spirit of Nepesht could not be satisfied with the life of a Comanche warrior. Soon his nature revealed itself. He was a hard and cruel spirit, dominant and hungry. In his own world he had fed on the blood of living things, and in this world his appetites were even greater. First he sought out the blood

of the animals of the forest, then the horses, and finally on the people of his band. He selected the strongest of warriors to feed upon, pretending to honour them with his friendship, and in his bloodlust fed from them until they were dead. Then one day he stopped feeding from the warriors and took for himself whatever woman he liked, doing as he willed with their minds and bodies as he fed and none could ever stop him. Whenever they tried to sneak up on him he could hear their thoughts and punished them.

As with the men, he satisfied himself fully with the women. Most died. But in the spring, those who did not die became pregnant and there were many new births in the village, all healthy, robust children.

As the days grew into summer, Nepesht's appetites increased. He was now unstoppable, stronger than anyone had ever been in both body and mind. Women said his teeth were like knives and his tongue sharp as a lance. All the people lived in fear and soon even children began to die from his insatiable appetite for blood.

As fall approached, the men of the band sent two messengers to consult the medicine man who lived on Cougar Mountain. The medicine man threw bones and chewed peyote. 'Inside the body of the man Tse-naha,' the medicine man told them, 'is a demon from the blue sun world. The demon wears Tse-naha's body like armour. His power is so great now that he cannot be killed as mortal men are killed.' He revealed to the messengers the ancient ways and rituals by which they might kill the demon Nepesht.

When the messengers returned to their own village, they learned that Tse-naha's wife had given birth to a son. But it was the son of Nepesht and not Tse-naha that she carried, and the son killed the mother as he left her womb. The warriors banded together in a plot to destroy Nepesht, but he was aware of it at once. He knew that they had learned the ways that would kill him. He fled with his son and several of the other children and their mothers in the dead of night, paying for safe passage with his captives. In this way he made his way back to the holes in the cliffs above the river. But he could not resist temptation and he took for himself the daughter of a chief. Deep in his blood lust frenzy, he was surprised by men of Tse-naha's own band who had tracked him for many nights. With the knowledge they learned from the medicine man of Cougar Mountain they destroyed the spirit Nepesht. The power of the magic door flap was destroyed with him.

The son of Nepesht and his many brothers and sisters are said to be living to this day, a blood-thirsty as their father.

* * *

He was naked, completely naked, and (she was ashamed to have noticed even in the midst of screaming) really fit. Cut. Toned. Mus-cu-lar.

After assuring the cacophony of voices from the surface that she was fine, just startled, no not a bear, a man, yes, an actual man, just a second, alive, yeah, not threatening, not so far, shut up, wait, wait, hold on, be with you in a sec—

She turned off the communicator and turned on the camcorder, transmitting sounds and images to her colleagues above. Which seemed crude and rude but the naked man appeared to be totally unaware of his nakedness. She tried not to hold the camera in front of her face. She didn't want him to think it was part of her.

'Hello.'

He'd risen to his feet when she'd screamed, quite calmly she now realized, turning to stare at her but without fear. That scream would have frightened the piss out of her had she been on the receiving end. His eyes glowed red in the light of her helmet torch. With careful controlled movements as if she was confronting a grumpy bear, she removed the lantern and switched it on. The chamber walls seemed to suck up all the best light and left them facing off in a reddish haze, a hue that did nothing for her complexion.

Still, she could at least meet his eyes instead of his...elsewhere. She squared her shoulders and met his eyes. (Brown, probably.) And then his nose (aquiline) and mouth (yummy). His hair was long and dark and streaming, damp, down his back like he'd just stepped out of the shower. In fact his skin had a viscous glistening quality that reminded her of a newly-hatched chick.

She rattled her head a bit, said something brilliant like 'bleah doh,' cleared her throat and asked, softly, gently, 'Did you fall? Are you hurt?' It was the only explanation she could think of even though it made no more sense than the hibernating bear.

He tilted his head and turned it back and forth, as if only now aware that he was hearing sounds, and that this hearing was taking place at the sides of his head.

'How did you get down here?'

He looked at her blank-faced and blinking.

'Did you fall?' Nothing.

She tried another tack, pointing at herself, 'Bernice,' then at his chest. 'You?' His brow furrowed. She repeated the performance. Herself. 'Bernice.' Him. '...'

Suddenly his eyes widened. He drew in a sharp breath. Apparently he'd just realized something. He shook his head, squeezed his eyes shut, and as she watched his expressions, she had a terrible feeling what that realization was all about. He didn't remember — who he was possibly, how to speak, where he was, or how he'd got there, and suddenly that lack had meaning. He clutched at his temples and opened his mouth and

moaned. The moan became a wail of such dreadful sorrow that she stuffed a hand into her own mouth to keep from sobbing. She became aware of the camcorder still in her hand, still transmitting images and sounds to the surface and she set it on the ground.

He fell onto his knees onto the solid floor of the chamber and she cried out for the pain he didn't or couldn't register.

'You guys better call for a med-evac!' Her team was strangely silent considering all the noise they'd been making moments before. 'Hello!' She had to yell over the sound of the man's sobbing, 'Need help down here!'

'Ms Summerfield?' an unfamiliar voice addressed her on her com. 'Sergeant Curtis Melcamp of the INA here, ma'am. If you would stay calm and stay put we'll be sending a couple of people down there to assist you shortly.'

INA. Shit piss damn.

By the time she was back on the surface, the naked man had been loaded onto a stretcher and into the med-evac. She watched it take off, standing next to Dr Ramirez, who looked as dazed, confused and suspicious as she felt.

'Do you know where they're taking him?'

'No,' he said, 'but I suspect it's a military hospital in Fort Worth.'

'How did they find out so fast?'

'Apparently, when a lot of holes are forced into existence inside the Earth's crust, satellites alert authorities.'

'We're idiots.'

'No, Bernice. How could we know the event occurred while we were having coffee this morning? No seismic activity or —' He shifted suddenly, noting one of the INA officer's looking their way. Ramirez grabbed her arm tight and leaned in close, speaking fast, and so quietly she almost didn't hear him. 'You're about to be vetted. Just remember, we thought it was part of the old dam, we had no idea the caverns were alien in nature.'

'Well, we didn't —' she began then realized, oh, he had. Ramirez knew when he let her go down there. He let her do it, even though she wasn't one of his students — because she wasn't one of his students. 'I see.'

'It's not what you think, Bernice.'

And it wasn't, but she wouldn't understand that for several years. Fourteen years in fact. Also the same number of years it would be before she saw the naked man again.

Star Cluster 47 Tucanae — Bathory's Star on the rim
5019

'Aw, hell. She's alive.'

The not-dead woman lay on the deck of the strange little craft, eyes closed, her breathing shallow.

'Damn it, Craw, you said there weren't nothin' alive in here!'

'There wasn't!' Craw insisted. She was just as shocked as anybody.

Adrift, no life signs, signal codes or registry — the skiff seemed ripe for the plucking, a small but profitable haul. 'Maybe the scans are messed,' she offered.

'Your job to know, damn it,' Bonne said. His tone was mild. She'd learned the hard way that his tone was not a reliable indicator of his mood. He squat down next to the woman, looking and pondering. What he was pondering Craw didn't much want to find out. She looked instead to Micah and Saul who were already beady-eyeing the strange tech.

'Central console,' Saul said. 'Don't get that often in boats this small. Not boats built for hominids anyways.' He glanced over at the not-dead woman, looked away right quick. 'Gray's set a bit heavy. Could be drift compensation.'

Craw snorted. Like he knew. Talking out his arse as usual.

'This surely is... different,' Micah declared, a bemused expression on his pretty mug. He patted one of the struts. 'This here was grown, not built.'

'Jeeza. You ever seen the like before?' Saul said. There was a hush of wonder in his voice, like a hope he was scared to utter lest he curse it. Micah scratched the back of his neck, but Craw could see the same hope jumping through his sinews. Wasn't a salvage crew in the galaxy didn't have the hope they'd find this kind of treasure amongst the scrap.

"Flox got something like, and —" a tiny pause like he was just throwing it out there — 'the Utlunta. Supposedly.'

Saul gulped loud enough to be heard on the other side of the Cluster. A thrill stirred the stale atmosphere. They looked at the not-dead woman. No one knew what the Utlunta looked like, but clever people at universities were pretty certain they didn't look like humans. And this woman was definitely human, from human stock at least.

Through the tatters of what had probably been a 'viro-suit once, the woman's skin looked paler than most, but not unnaturally so. Must've been a real good suit once to keep her skin so nice. Gone to black ash and black melt now. Looked like she'd busted out of an egg brand new. If they could salvage some of that tech they'd be the richest bastards in the whole damn universe. Criminy. Not even a singed hair on her head. Or anywhere else for that matter. Pretty hair too, the colour of ripe pepricots — all luscious and glistening golden-red. Touching that hair would be like putting her hand in a cloud at the top of a Buddha's own mountain. Her hand reached out like it had a mind of its own -

Micah yelped, and Craw jumped back guiltily. She turned to see him sucking on the top of his hand, staring at the console with a wild-eyed gleeful avarice. 'Bitch took a bite out o' me,' he said, drawing a rag from a pocket in his coveralls. It took her a second to realize he meant the ship. 'Organic interface, I reckon. Semi-sentient. That could've messed with the scanners right enOUGH.'

He wound the cloth around his hand. Blood spotted the grimy grey. On the deck, the woman's eyeballs were skittering to and fro beneath the fragile gossamer of her lids.

'I don't wanna jinx it or anything, Boss,' Saul said, tut I think this could be a genuine artefact.'

'When we know for certain we'll throw a party,' Bonne replied. He was never one to let pleasure show on his face, like as if gods were watching him all the time just waiting to catch him enjoying something so's they could squash it flat. 'Least we know we got sentient components. Those can be reconditioned. Fetch a good price too. Damn good price.'

'Yep.'

The woman emitted a plaintive sigh.

'She's still alive,' Craw pointed out.

'Ain't human tech,' Saul said, 'can't be hers, can it?'

'You don't know for certain. She could've bought it or had it built —' She broke off at the sight of his scowl. No point talking to him anymore. She took a deep breath and tried to appeal to the more sensible of her crewmates. 'We can't claim salvage if there's anyone alive on board.'

'There's ways around that,' Micah said, not looking at her.

'Not legal ones.'

Bonne rose with a groan and a growl. The groan was for the grinding protest of his joints in the heavier gray of the little ship. The growl was directed at her.

'I ain't hauling this boat back to Habriuz so's we can languish portside

for years while lawyers hash it out. And I ain't leaving it for some less ethical bunch to take advantage of neither.'

'Reckon we got two choices here,' Saul said. He looked from Bonne to Micah ignoring Craw altogether. 'One, we chuck her out the airlock. None the wiser.'

Craw was so shocked no sound would come out of her mouth.

'Poorer in soul, though,' Bonne said.

'S'pose. Two, we give her to Piffany or one of his kind.'

'What?' she said, finally, then louder. 'WHAT?'

'I dunno,' Micah muttered, looking down and away. Not exactly waving a banner of dissent.

'We don't traffic in flesh!'

'Not selling. More like... donating.'

She turned to Bonne, stunned to see him actually considering it. 'No! You can't. No dealing with slavers or slavers business. You swore me that when I signed on.'

'And you said there weren't no one alive on board. You swore me that.'

'I got no life signs when I scanned! You heard Micah—'

Saul stabbed a finger her direction. 'We boarded on your say so! No. Life. You gotta make it be true now, Craw, one way or t'other.'

'Look. Don't matter to me if this here's s an Utlunta slipper or a twilight schooner from Tir Na sorch, I don't care,' Bonne said, his voice strained and low, 'We *need* this haul or we might as well scrap the boat and go our separate ways. You think any other captain'll sign you on?' He let that sink in for a second. 'So. Your choice. How's she gonna be dead? Out the airlock? Or bond slave?'

Craw dressed the woman in her own clothes, her *best* clothes – the blue frock from Tully's in Adonia Parish, and the stockings with bows at the knees. Saul reminded her that if they weren't asking money for the woman then Craw might not want to dress her up like they were. 'I wore these to church!' she protested and then felt like a fool.

He was just tormenting.

'Cause he could.

'Reckon we're fools not asking something for her,' he muttered, gnawing on a chew stick. His big body was blocking the bulkhead door, making everything in the hole-in-the-hold seem that much smaller.

'Well, we ain't doing that, so get it out of your greedy fat head.' If he spat chew on the floor in here she was gonna kick him in the throat.

'Just saying, us not taking nothing for her –' He flicked a glance at the woman – 'her being a looker and all, well, that'll stink of con. Piffany's gonna wonder why, what's wrong with her, or what we got that's better.' He paused and looked thoughtfully at his chew stick then tucked it, thoughtfully, into his chew-stained breast pocket. 'I'm gonna talk to the cap'n, we gotta ask a little something for her just for appearances –'

She stood up, fists clenched, her jaw so tight she thought her teeth might crack. 'Don't put that in Captain's head, Saul, I mean it.'

He smiled suddenly, that sideways, almost charming smile of his, head cocked like he was listening to good sense she couldn't hear. 'Only reason I didn't suggest it first off was to 'suage your guilt.'

'You ought to look to your own.'

'Must know by now I got none.' But his gaze was drawn again to the unconscious woman, trailing over her shape, lingering at the ribbons above her dimpled knees. Before Craw could punch him in the gut, his eyes went wide and he drew in a short sharp hiss of a breath. In fact, for just a moment there, she could've sworn he looked scared shitless. It was gone in a blink. Then he just looked pissed off.

'You think she's gonna thank you for saving her once Piffany's got her? She'd be better off dead.'

'Your kind always says that.'

After he left, she pulled the blanket up over those be-ribboned knees, and then up, up over the buttery-soft silk of her best frock. She was certain that when the woman opened her eyes they would be that same shimmering colour, like the wing of a dragonfly, or a blue straggler hanging in the cosmos.

The first couple of days Craw figured she'd have to keep a close eye on the boys, Saul in particular (despite his hasty retreat that first night), given that their guest was pretty and female and didn't talk much — which point for Saul was the most important of the three. But they all seemed content to stay well away. Even the Captain hadn't come down to the hold except to grab a case of Winokurs. Didn't want to have to look the poor thing in the eye, Craw reckoned, though she herself fully intended to stare into that abyss and spoon feed it soup if needs be. Trouble was the woman still hadn't come to. Maybe she never would. Of course, if she did die, surely solve an awful lot of ethical problems and assuage more than just her conscience. Save her from something far worse, Craw knew, though she'd never admit it to the likes of Saul.

She wasn't naïve enough to buy into the old adage 'where there's life there's hope'. She'd been born in a work camp in Habriuz before the Liberation, seen lots of bad. Kids got taken from their folks to serve as whores in Occupation-run brothels and that was only a tiny part of the bad. Some folks (like Craw's own ma) scarred their offspring to keep them from that fate. And it wasn't like that kind of flesh-slaving didn't still go on, especially out on the Rim. Must do or fellas like Piffany wouldn't exist to take advantage of it. Even the best of that life would be a hard hard life. A terrible life. She wouldn't wish that on anybody, and the more she thought on it, the more she couldn't bear the idea of the sweet helpless creature lying limp in her arms having to endure it. Maybe she would be better off dead. Maybe Craw ought not to bother trying to get liquids into her, or

turning her or rubbing her limbs to keep the blood moving through them. And yet, she couldn't help wishing the woman would wake up. Open her eyes and touch Craw's face and say -

What? What?

She tucked the blanket in tighter around the woman, and brushed the back of her hand over a papery cheek, across the cracked lips, letting her fingers trail into the waves of red-gold hair. She watched, enthralled as eyes moved beneath the lids like her soul was trying to swim to the surface of her body and break through the ice, break free. Craw leaned in close, staring and praying hard, trying to force it to happen with the strength of her fervent wishing. A strange compulsion came over her as she bent close, the urge to press her lips to those lips, to open her mouth and pour her own life into the woman, be swallowed whole.

She drew back gasping, horrified. How was she any better than Saul? She fled the hold and didn't stop until she was in her own bunk.

Tomorrow, she thought, tomorrow I'll have a plan. Tomorrow she'll wake up and I'll know what to do.

If the haul was as good as Captain Bonne expected she might even be able to buy the woman's freedom.

It's only a dream, she thinks, I can do what I want.

She can see in the dark, pulled along the passages, descending ladders, walking a nautilus swirl down and down to below decks. The blue from the woman's eyes lights her way. Blue, blue, she knew they'd be blue! As she reaches the hole-in-the-hold, the door in the bulkhead wears a nimbus of blue fire. And then she's inside, and pale arms are held out to her, and Craw flows toward that promise like she's returning to her own sweet mama before the bad came.

She feels safe and warm and slick and dry at the same time, hot and cool at the same time, all the tiny hairs on her body quivering. Her mama was never so soft, never kissed her that way, behind her ear, along her throat like that, like that oh, tongue leaving a tingling trail, warm and viscous like that.

A goose-pimpled leg slides over her thigh, and then it's her leg all prickly with shivers. She wraps herself around the woman like another blanket until she's inside her skin or the other way around, and they touch and touch and whisper back and forth, words she knows knows what they're feeling but can't translate — `chunkapapa' `tsenahaha' `tluntalala' — hardsoft hardsoft honey and blood words, words that travel from the centre of her forehead, over her nose and linger on her lips a moment before plummeting down to the aching emptiness between her legs. She wants to be filled with this language of hearts and blood and shining dark suns. She wants to touch but can't find her hands. Her heart knows; it leaps within her chest, pounding at her breastbone like it's trying to escape. The lapping tongue is moving so fast

now, s0 fast that she hears the blur of motion, sees the buzz before the sting, the prick, the stab -

Oh!

Oh. The pain is... the pain is... stunning, ignites like burning fuel between her legs, a fire blooming in her belly and up and up and — oh. Oh. Ohohohohohoh, yeesss. This is what *pleasure feels* like, this blossoming agony in *every nerve*. 'What you are, what are you?' she asks the tongue imparting all this knowledge through her flesh.

'My name is Lilu,' the tongue says against her thigh, and then darts out and stings her again.

Star cluster 47 Tucanae was a roughly baked bean-shaped association of about three hundred thousand densely packed stars, upwards of 12 billion years old.

Captain Bonne's Pearly Girl was Orbiting 47 Tucanae-45,329 — a star that looked far younger, maybe two to three billion years at most. This type of star was called a 'blue straggler' on account of its colour and apparent laggard age. Spacers had another name for them: Vampire Stars, endlessly stripping the outer gas envelopes from their neighbours to refuel and maintain the hotter, bluer fires of youth. 47 Tucanae-45,329 was also better known as Bath0ry's Star. B0nne had vague recollection of a legend from Earth having something to do with that name, but as he'd never been t0 Earth (and, in fact, resented Earthocentric cultural biases on principle), he'd never paid much attention to the undoubtedly clever and ironic (ifyou were an Earther) name for the star. He only knew it wasn't a good idea to spend much time in orbit around blue stragglers. Sometimes you could pick up things that got caught in the gases. They had. A good something it was too. Priceless alien artefacts weren't the sort of thing they usually caught from a blue straggler and the Pearly Girl would have been gone three days ag0 if not f0r that. Bonne felt the sooner they were gone now they had it, the better.

'Where the hell is Micah? He was supposed t0 have that thing locked down and ready to tow two hours ago.'

Saul was in no mood for Bonne's mood. He felt hangdog and hungover, which wasn't rightly fair as he'd had no fun at all the night before. 'Taking tea with the Empress,' he replied, 'how the hell should I know.'

'Not in his bunk. Not answering his com.'

'He's prolly too busy humping the struts.' Saul grinned as another p0ssibility struck him. 'Or maybe he's down playing nursemaid to our Sleeping Beauty.'

'Why'd he be doing that?'

'Craw wanted him to set up an IV for re-hydration. He's the one knows how all the med stuffworks.'

Captain Bonne shook his head mournfully. 'Damn. Wish she'd just let it

go. Be a blessing to the lady in question and the whole wretched lot of us, if she never came to again.'

'Yeah, well, do believe our Miss Sulie Craw is smitten, Cap'n sir.'

'Now that is a shame. If I weren't so attached to the possibility of eternal salvation, I'd've taken care of the situation myself.'

'Be a mercy really.'

Bonne cocked an eye Saul's direction. 'Yeah?'

'Kind of life she'd have? Reckon so.'

Saul watched a muscle in Bonne's jaw jump back and forth. When the Captain finally looked him square in the eye, he had to give credit: once Bonne set his mind, he faced hell straight on without flinching.

'Figure you can be merciful there, Saul?'

'Figure I got it in me.'

'Then I leave you to it.'

'Might need to distract her guardian angel.'

Bonne gave a terse nod and got on the loudspeaker. 'CRAW! Up top! NOW!' He gave Saul a solemn look. 'Do it kindly and quick.'

'Yessir, Cap'n, sir.'

'When you're done with that, find Micah, lock that ship down and get back here fast. We're breaking orbit and hauling junk back to Habriuz at eleven hundred hours.'

'Whatever you say, Cap'n.'

Saul recollected there wasn't a pillow on that makeshift bed the woman was using in the hole, but he didn't want to risk running into Craw in quarters when she was on her way up. He ducked down to the engine room instead. First thing he saw was Micah slumped in a chair with his back to the door.

Saul had been known to sleep through hails, alarms and claxons his own self when he'd spent a hard night clinking, but Micah wasn't much of a drinker. Been a bit off his feed though since he got cut and scraped over there on the artefact. *Tit me,* Micah had said, laughing. Recalling that, Saul tried and failed to repress a shudder. There were all kinds of stories about the Utlunta in this cluster, wild tales that had grown with the telling over the centuries of space travel. How their ships used blood for fuel, how they stole babies and tiny children to feed the always hungry maws of their vessels, conquering entire planets in their lust for more blood, blood, blood. Saul used to wonder why they bothered to travel if their ships were so damned needy. Seemed like the people were slaves to the needs of their ships and not the other way around. Maybe if they'd stopped feeding the damned things, they could have settled down somewhere and had a decent sort of life.

Maybe they did, maybe that's just what happened. Anyway, he doubted there was any such tech that ran on blood. There was too many different kinds of blood in the galaxy for one thing and for another Utlunta was

spacers' legend — stories told in portside bars like the ones about the ghost ships from n-space, folding stars, and Reavers.

'Micah, get up,' he said. 'Cap'n wants that ship locked down and ready to tow by eleven hundred.' Micah didn't stir. With a sudden foreboding, Saul stepped closer, put his hand on the man's shoulder to give him a shake. Micah listed to one side, tipped forward and slipped like a bag of dried beans onto the deck.

He wasn't dead. There was a pulse, and a little spot of condensation on the deck from his breath. It just wasn't much of a pulse or a whole lot of breathing. Saul leapt up from his examination and started pacing and wiping his hands vigorously on his trouser legs. What if that woman had a plague of some sort, and that's what put her into a coma? What if it was something on the ship itself? Now Micah had it. They'd all been exposed. They'd all end up like —

'Watcha doing, Saul?'

Craw stood in the doorway. Her black hair was floating around her head from static, and her scars stood out in sharp relief against the dark rose brown of her cheeks. She wore a dreamy half-smile and nothing else.

'Jeeza,' he breathed, his hand waving in the direction of Micah puddled on the deck behind the chair, because surely that was more important than a fellow crew member blocking the doorway with her bare nakedness. Plague, plague, blood ships and biting, and they were all going to die and she was standing there buck naked.

When he saw who was behind her, all the words he might have said got tangled in his throat.

When the knock came he was fighting the cat over the last chunk of tuna. The cat was putting up a good fight. It was a game they played, each pretending a lack of concern for the other's well being. The cat was much better at the game. And anyway, he had water on to boil for pot noodles. She wouldn't eat those.

It was nearly two in the morning. Holovid on, sound muted. Too many burgers and fries dancing about while his stomach churned. Too many cars gliding fast over winding roads, going nowhere, but really really fast, because it wasn't about the destination, it was about the journey. Too many beautiful women who, when the sound was up, looked like they would just as soon grind a fellow beneath their heels as walk arm and arm with him. Without sound they looked elongated and stretched out. They looked hungry for something. Sometimes he'd play matchmaker, pairing them with the revolving burgers and jewel-toned tomatoes, and the fries glistening with fat. Just look at them. They needed those burgers far more than he did. He'd feel satisfied, almost altruistic.

Without the sound, he could be more detached, more in control of how he felt about what he saw, like turning the wheel of a kaleidoscope, turn and colours shifted into new patterns, and there was a pattern to the patterns. He remembered kaleidoscopes from when he was a child, angles of mirrors and little bits of coloured glass. And then he remembered it wasn't his childhood he remembered.

For a while there was only the scrape of his fingernails against the tin, the click of cat's teeth and her raspy little tongue. So, of course, the knock at the door startled him. He dropped the can, oily contents flung across the floor, striping the wall. Cat bounded for the largest chunk of tuna and he surrendered all pretence of fighting.

It was late. It was troubling, this knock. A vague tickle at the back of his mind, something so simple, something he should know. But he still couldn't remember the basics, sometimes. A knock was polite, yes? A bad person wouldn't bother to knock, right? Still, the only person who ever came to see him anymore was Jesus. Not the lord and saviour of Christian myth (whom he'd yet to meet despite assurances from the missionary couple that passed out pamphlets on his way to work), but his caseworker, Jesus Valdis who pronounced it Hey-zoos Vahldees and didn't think 'Hey Zeus, how's it hanging' was particularly funny. Of course he realized later why it wasn't funny. He'd got his classical references mixed up. Zeus was the son that castrated the father, not the other way around. He'd not opened his mouth for days after that, for fear something horrifically stupid would come out.

But that was months ago. Everything was fine now.

Even when he'd been at his worst, Jesus had never come to see him at

two in the morning. Only one who'd ever come to see him at two in the morning was a woman.

'I've never seen you before.'

Tut you have! I found you, *remember.*'

'No. Not you. You're a different time.'

'I'm a little *older* but — I'm *older*, but I'm still me.'

'You're a different time.'

'Sure, fine. OK. You don't remember me so I suppose it's pointless to ask if you *remember* any of the people that *were* with me when I found you.'

'I *remember* them.'

'Great. Great. OK. Have any of them tried to visit you *here*? Dr Ramirez —'

He chuckled. As if he could remember one *doctor* out of so many.

'Please it's really important.'

'How did you *get* in?'

'Um... I have a friend. He's waiting in the... *er...* *car.*'

'He has a door like mine.'

'What?'

'You should *leave*. Nurse is coming.'

look you, *whoever you are*, *whatever* your name is called —'

'I'm Nameless.'

'So you *keep* saying, but I know what you are now. And so did Dr Ramirez and now he's dead.'

'You should *go*. You're the *wrong time.*'

A scuffling noise in the hallway on the other side of the door brought his focus back, made him realize he'd been remembering a thing that had actually happened to him, to this being he was now.

Muttering voices in the hall outside the door. The cat followed a trail of oil and tuna bits towards it. He felt something flutter in his gut. Fear, perhaps. More than one person was outside that door. More than one person had come to see him at two in the morning. Another knock. Then, 'Hello?' A man's voice calling out. 'Mister... *er...* Nameless? May we speak with you?'

'Yes,' he said. Obviously the man could speak with him, clearly capable of speech. He waited for what the man would speak. Cat sat on her haunches and began licking her paw, prepping for a good face cleaning. He could hear the water roiling in the pan now, the angry hiss of steam. A good weapon that. He realized it was the first time that he'd considered a use for boiling water that didn't involve tea or rice or noodles. It was a familiar kind of consideration. Comfortable in his mind. Second cousin to an actual memory.

Another knock.

This one shook the door. Suddenly he was at the cooker, hand hovering over the handle of the pot. 'Do you work for Jesus?' he called out, but he pronounced it wrong, like that couple with the pamphlets —

'Oh my goddess,' a woman's voice said, 'he thinks we're — We're not Jehovah's Witnesses out here, if that's what you're worried about!'

'I have hot water!'

'What? What's he talking about?'

'Mr Nameless,' the man said very calmly. He pitched it exactly right for a calming effect. 'We only want to help you find your true nature. To be all that you can be.'

'Get back to where I once belonged, you mean?'

'Perhaps. If that's possible. Yes. To remember and embrace what you are so that you might teach us the ways.'

Teach the ways of what? He could remember the bends and courses of rivers that didn't exist, and the taste of animals that were extinct. He could remember breath-feathers and smoke-ears. He could remember swimming through rock as if it were water. But he couldn't remember anything really useful. Like computer programming. Or his name.

Before the significance of his loss hit him, there had been a moment of sublime emptiness. A nothing that was full of everything. And then the woman. And the hospital. And the long depression and this comfortable needing of nothing now. He wanted a lot of things. But he didn't really need them. Cat was enough company. And as long as he remembered to buy the tuna she was content. She brought him mice. Sometimes they were still living. He'd bite into them and fill his mouth with blood.

'Tell him,' someone said to someone else outside his door.

'We are the descendents of Nepesht who was also called Tse-naha — blood drinker, spirit eater. We have come to bring you home, Grandfather.'

And he remembers.

He reaches into his chest, between the bars of the cage that hold his heart and power, and clenches his fingers around it and pulls it out. A robe of blood and sinew, a shadow under a blue sun. He unfurls the robe and lays it upon the floor. Somewhere far away, there is pounding and shouts. Cat hunkers down snarling. At them or at him he'll never know now. Nepesht presses his palms together, bows his head over the fingertips, a quick prayer before raising his arms to the sky he can't see before he jumps in the air and into the robe.

By the time the door opens, Nepesht has already reached out and pulled the robe in after him.

Marseilles

Late Summer 1212

Of those who claimed first hand witness to the Crucifixion, Mulo would credit his master for speaking truth on the subject, for his master had been to the ends of the earth and back, had seen the beginning of time and the end of all things. He was very well travelled. Still, as Mulo looked out the narrow window of his room in the rafters, he had to wonder if even his master could have imagined that, amongst the many thieves, murderers, rebels and traitors crucified on Golgotha hill so long ago, one of them was destined to become the reason all these children were in Marseilles waiting for the sea to part.

He could just make out the sea, a flash of white and gold in the setting sun. And stretching towards it was new a landscape made of flesh, bone, and blood; an undulating, noisy mass of young beating hearts and awkward shuffling feet that had sprung up virtually overnight, overflowing the streets, the bogs, and fields beyond. These were the child crusaders led by another of God's chosen: the shepherd Stephan of Cloyes in the

. According to the inn's proprietress, Dame Merveaux, the people of the Orléanais were prone to fits and visions: 'They see the face of Christ in every horse dropping and puddle of water. It's the mountain air, young sir. Goes straight to the head. Likely the reason they have so much trouble with the walking dead, I suspect. Indecent the numbers of people won't stay buried in the Orléanais.'

She spoke on the natural assumption he didn't count himself as one of those indecent numbers. She had assumed, in fact, that Mulo was a child crusader himself, albeit a wealthy one who could afford to stay at an inn, one whose family had provided him with fine clothes and walking boots and weapons no farmer's child would have even seen up close. He

suspected she'd considered ransom during their first interview, the way she'd grilled him for information.

He was often mistaken for a child, couldn't be helped, given his nature. More often, because of his nature, people mistook him for one of the God-cursed malformed — dwarf or midget — a mistake that proved grave for those who thought to take advantage of it. His weapons were not for show. Fortunately, his landlady was an opportunist in the truest sense and felt that sufficient coin in hand was more convenient and involved less planning than coin in the future. Generously paid for a week's room and board, she was quite free with her information.

The children had been arriving in Marseilles since before sunrise, thousands upon thousands of them, as well as priests, beggars, vagabonds and whores that had attached themselves to young Stephan's retinue somehow, and all of them waiting through the day in the blistering heat for the miracle he'd promised them before the setting of the sun.

Mulo had only just risen from his bed. There was still too much light for his comfort as yet, but he imagined the last daylight streaked upon the water. He could almost hear the hiss of the setting sun, the air gone still, expectant, as if the entire world was holding its breath. He waited, breathless as the rest of world.

Minutes later, a sound rolled over the town, and this was not his imagination. Disappointment like a great wave, the plaintive sighing of a thousand little hearts whose god has left them hungry and homeless on the edge of glory and eternal salvation. He could practically reach out and touch the feeling, hold it in his hand, feel it in his throat — betrayal.

He washed himself, dressed in his finest, strapped on his short sword, a long knife and a dagger, and arranged his cloak over them. Tonight he would meet with Hugh Ferrous and Guillaume le Cochon as arranged. They had promised his master certain things and tonight they would offer certain other things. It struck Mulo that his master must surely have known that by the time his servant arrived there would be grand new opportunities for profit. Iron and Pig were evil men, but in the most ordinary of ways, all greed and lust and avarice. True evil was beyond such human concerns. True evil was pure. Sublime. Beautiful. Terrifying. His master had said as much and his master knew more about it than any one alive or dead.

There would be hungry children everywhere tonight.

As Mulo descended the narrow stairs that led to the alley and the kitchen, he considered that his odds for a quick unobserved blood feast had never been so good in all his twenty-two years of death.

The V is for Vampire Tour

Transtemporal Excursion™ from YESTERWAYS LTD.

Dear YESTERWAYS LTD,

I am 18 years old, and really into, like, goth, you know. Some of my so called friends say there's no such things as vampires and shit. They said its all inbred aristos with porphyria and HIPS (hemauore incipient proto-mutation syndrome), but I think you couldn't offer your record bookings V is for Vampire Tour if that was right. Please tell me the truth; are there such things as vampires?

**VIRGINIA O'HELSING,
115 WEST NINETY-FIFTH STREET CHICACARGO.
UNITED STATES OF TEXAS**

VIRGINIA, your friends are 'bo squiff. Sceptic skeptics in a skeptic age. They got to peep what they heart. They decline to varda except for what they think can be pinned down by the Man's science. They have little teeny tiny minds. All minds, Virginia, whether they be adults or tweens, are little. In the great universal span of YESTERWAYS TOURS yo' mates are but mere insects, ants, in their intellect, as compared with the boundless TOURIST POSSIBILITIES around them, as measured by the intelligence capable of grasping the whole of truth and knowledge.

Yes, VIRGINIA, there are Vampires. They exist as certainly as obsessive love, addiction, and eternal damnation™ exist, and you know that they abound even in the enlightened United States of Texas [JUST ADDED! DAY TRIP WALKING TOUR OF POSSUM KINGDOM LAKE AND ENVIRONS. SEE THE BOATHOUSE WHERE 'THE GENTLEMAN' LURED YOUNG TEXAS CHEERLEADERS TO THEIR DEATHS!] and give to your life its highest piquancy and import. Alas! how dreary would be the world if there were n0 Vampires. It would be as dreary as ifthere were no TOUR GUIDES. There would be no childlike fear then, n0 dark poetry, no Outsider goth romance to make tolerable this workaday existence. We should have no pale enjoyment, except in sense and sight. The eternal UV strobe light with which gothpunk fills the world would be extinguished.

Not believe in Vampires! You might as well not believe in aliens! And then what would become of YESTERWAYS 50 CLASSIC INVASIONS OF EARTH TOUR? You might take our V Tour a dozen times [WHY

NOT TAKE ADVANTAGE OF BLOCK BOOKING] and fail to catch sight of Prince Alucard™ Varney The Vampire Bus Driver™ or the Evil Spockula™ but even if you personally don't see a vampire, what would that prove? Just because you don't see something is no proof it does not exist. The most real things in the world are those that neither children nor adults can see. Did you ever see Tau-neutrinos dancing on the lawn? Of course not, but that's no proof that they are not there. Nobody can conceive or imagine all the wonders there are unseen and unseeable in the world.

You may tear apart the baby's **MY FIRST HADRON COLLIDER** and see what makes the noise inside, but there is a veil covering the unseen world which none can tear apart. Only faith, fancy, poetry, love, romance, and the **NEW SPECIAL OFFER V FOR VAMPIRE TOUR** can push aside that curtain and view the vampiric beauty and glory beyond. No Vampires?! They unlive and unlive for ever. A thousand years from now, nay, ten times ten thousand years from now, they will continue to red the neck of maidenhood.

Some highlights of the V IS FOR VAMPIRE TOUR

(All information correct as of Summer Season 5019):

Although Erszebet 'Elizabeth' Bathory (The Blood Countess) was not, in the strictest sense, a Vampire, no gothic tour would be complete without a visit to the Countess's own chamber of horrors where the blood of her victims was drained directly into a tub for her terrifying beauty regime. Guests will have the opportunity to step into an Iron Maiden similar to the one she used to slowly murder 612 virgin girls, documenting their gruesome deaths in her diary. Afterwards, visit the castle gift shop, Bathory's Bathworks, and take advantage of **YESTERWAYS LTD** group discounts on Countess Bathory — Beauty in the Blood line of moisturizers and cosmetics!

In the quaint town of Medvegia, Serbia, gather with local authorities to exhume the body of Arnold Paole.

'They found that he was quite complete and undecayed, and that fresh blood flowed from his eyes, nose, mouth, and ears; that the shirt, the covering, and the coffin were completely bloody; that the old nails on his hands and feet, along with the skin, had fallen off, and that new ones had grown; and since they saw from this that he was a true vampire, they drove a stake through his heart, according to their custom, whereby he gave an audible groan and bled copiously.'

Guests will breakfast at an authentic 18th century public house. Then it's off to 18th century Paris for a night at the Theatre des Vampires, where you might be lucky enough to catch a violin solo performed by the Vampire Lestat (as portrayed by Armand Piper Destry) followed by a visit to 1849 and the execution of Sergeant Francois Bertrand — the Vampire of Montparnasse — the only vampire ever to be convicted of lycanthropy!

Jazz is all the rage in Earth's Germany of the 1920s. Josephine Baker causes a sensation in Berlin with her sexy 'banana dance.' DaDaism puzzles and infuriates the bourgeois. Kurt Weill invents the musical. Vladimir Nabokov begins writing his first novels in Berlin. And in Hanover, Fritz Haarman lures young men to his home, feeds them sumptuous food and drugged wine, and then sucks them dry of their blood. He sells the cut-up carcasses as meat at a street kiosk —

It wasn't clear to Bernice if Berlin in the 1920s was actually on the itinerary (or even, goddess forbid, Hanover) or if the passage about Germany was merely colourful filler. It was clear however, that Countess Bathory's Beauty-in-the-Blood extra rich moisture cream with natural emollients was working a treat on her rough elbows. She was only a little disappointed by the lack of actual virgin's blood in the product. Didn't come close to the disappointment she felt on Evil Spockula's rollercoaster ride at Disney Alpha Centauri.

The Earth leg of the Vampire Tour was proving particularly trying for Richard Lux de Babineaux. Nothing was going according to plan or schedule. The caravan seemed to be consistently missing target times by just enough to heighten the risk of running into a previous tour — possibly himself, which he'd been warned would not be good. He'd already put in a call to Operations, but so far no technician had got back to him. Under the circumstances he'd been forced to alter the itinerary and push ahead to the later centuries in the hopes that it would be easier to make the programming adjustments himself.

Actual vampire sightings rarely (well, *never*) occurred at any of the historical places and times on Earth at any rate. There was that once when someone thought they saw Dracula climbing down a wall with a baby in his teeth, which was interesting but unlikely as that Dracula was less fact more fiction. Also the sighting turned out to be an invasive species of lizard from Kathakatio — a previous tourist's tiny pet that escaped and grew to monstrous proportions in the generous gravity of Earth — the temporal clean-up of which was a legal and environmental nightmare for YESTERWAYS LTD and the reason he'd been promoted to guide the vampire tours in the first place. One could hardly rely on the

odd escaped pet to make history exciting. It was up to Babineaux to keep interest from flagging. Bored tourists were soon surly and apt to demand refunds. Of course his years spent in THE THEATRE (and that short stint as a motivational speaker on Cawdry) stood him in good stead, but they had never been quite so taxed to the limit as they had been during this particular jaunt. These days everyone expected the stops and side trips to be like the haemovore nature preserve on Vikramaditya where one could observe the creatures in their natural habitat — at rest in their honeycombed caves during the day, and at night, viewed through infrared scopes and the safety of enclosures, as they hunted hapless wandering villagers. Earth was different. Most of the vampires were in the category of legends, fictions, and myths, sometimes misinterpretations of corpse decay, often delusional hybrids or psychopaths. Actual homo-anthropophilous? Harder to spot than Sasquatch.

His discomfort with the Earth portion of the programme was heightened by two of his guests: one, Tom Wakeen, a student on holiday from Lunar City's Ogallala Community College; and two, Miss Bixie Summerfield (of the Texarkana Summerfields'). There was always at least one in the bunch who liked to demonstrate his/her/its knowledge (gleaned from edutainment holofeeds no doubt) by flaunting 'facts' at him in the form of questions. Two in the bunch was putting a strain on his patience. Besides, they were ruining it for everyone.

'But isn't it true that the hair and beard on a corpse only appears to have grown on account of the way the skin shrinks back and makes the hair and beard more visible?'

'My goodness! I reckon that's what livor mortis looks like. That's how they used to tell if a body was moved in murder investigations — by livor mortis. If lividity was present where it shouldn't be, or not present where it should be, then the body had been moved. Haven't any of y'all seen CSI Chicacargo?'

'Check it. The blood at the mouth? Totally not fresh, man. Cuz even though blood coagulates at death, sometimes it goes all liquid again, right? Isn't that crazy? It, like, migrates to the mouth because of the bloat from the gases produced by decomposition. Decomposition puts pressure on the lungs and cuz lungs have a lot of blood in them all that blood gets forced to the mouth and nose. That's why people probably thought it was fresh. Dude, olden days people were so gullible about stuff.'

'But even the Egyptians knew that the finger and toenails fall off, didn't they? That's why they put those fancy little metal thimbles over the fingers and toes of the pharaohs, isn't that right, Dick?'

Ms Summerfield had insisted on addressing him as Dick from the moment he'd introduced himself.

'Do people call you Dick?' she'd asked.

'Not at all,' he'd replied, and for emphasis, 'No' and then, noting her expression, added, 'Never.'

'Really? Y'all don't mind if I call you Dick, do you? You remind me of a Dick I used to know.'

He did mind, very much, but nothing could dissuade her from it, short of emphatic gestures and shouting, which he might later regret - financially, and in other ways as well. Her father was somewhat influential in galactic politics, he'd been given to understand, and (from what he could glean from her garrulous assertions around the dining table) she was descended on her mother's side from Texas Cowboy Cheerleaders, one of whom had been instrumental in the capture of that famous 20th century vampire known as the Gentleman. Certainly gave her cachet with the other tourists. Coincidentally, YESTERWAYS LTD had only added the Gentleman's Texas hideout at the last minute when the City of Sunnydale, California had refused to reissue permits to park the tour caravans on Main Street anytime after the year 1997 (and then only between the hours of midnight and 4 AM!).

At least the other members of the tour were somewhat easier to guide. Nicos and Rasputina Hibert, a charming, elderly goth couple, had been on the tour before. Rasputina still dyed her hair jet black, bless her heart.

The Cegas were a mixed-species family group, Naxosan and Human — not that there was anything wrong with that, of course. Quite the contrary, he found their offspring to be amongst the best behaved of any species he'd ever encountered, a quality he attributed to the psychological benefits of Naxosan sexual amorphism, and not least, the firm guidance of their Human sister-wife.

And of course there were the two ladies from Habriuz: Miss Lilu, whose ethereal beauty could only be the result of costly cosmetic gengineers, and Miss Sulie, her devoted 'companion'. Miss Lilu had not taken to temporal travel well it seemed, and had spent much of the tour sequestered on the caravan, or languishing in various lodgings in the safety of a YESTERWAYS LTD patented bubble tent. YESTERWAYS LTD offered bubble tents to all their touring guests (with a small surcharge). Although most tourists enjoyed the idea of immersing themselves in the local colour, they were happy to have a pocket of their own, more hygienic, century in which to sleep and bathe. Miss Lilu had made constant use of hers. As a result Miss Sulie had little opportunity to take part in many of the side trips let alone the main ventures — a pity, certainly, but hardly his problem. They'd read and signed the agreement. Given the ill-fated nuisances of this particular tour, they weren't missing out on much.

Still, he had every confidence that the featured vampires of the later centuries would provide ample interest. Chilled champagne served with locally produced fruits and cheeses wouldn't hurt either.

Vlad Tepes Dracul III (Dracula, Vlad the Impaler), also known as the son of the Dragon and sometimes called the son of the devil. For good reason! Ten thousand people were impaled by Vlad

Tepes in the Transylvanian city of Sibiu in 1460. Our tour will not be visiting the city of Sibiu in the year 1460, rest assured! The Dragon had two brothers, one older, Mircea and one younger, Radu. It is from the younger brother that Count Dracula of Bram Stoker's chilling tale is descended, and our tour will visit the home of this Wallachian Prince of Darkness, first to the quaint little town of Borgo Prund, and then, weather permitting, there will be a short hike to that very castle where young Jonathan Harker made his harrowing escape in the novel. Be sure to bring your appetite and plenty of local currency as there will be a picnic and many souvenir opportunities.

In the Borgo Pass they saw wolves and gypsies. The gypsies were totally authentic, Bernice was pretty certain, although as gypsies they weren't exactly forthcoming on the subject. The wolf sighting was iffy. Rasputina Hibert was certain it was the same wolf, if not the same wolf pack she and her husband had seen the last time, which for Bernice, as a seasoned time traveller, was like a giant neon banner reading 'This Way to the Wrong.' But apparently it turned out that Rasputina had minor depth perception difficulties as the result of retinal implants she should have had replaced ages ago. Her husband informed her that the wolves appeared to be dogs. At her disappointed expression he suggested that they still might belong to Dracula's gypsies and they discussed this possibility excitedly for some time.

What they did not see, however, was anything that remotely resembled a vampire. Worse, they were not seeing vampires while wearing ridiculous costumes.

The clothing was the biggest giveaway when amateurs went sightseeing through time. Bernice had superb fashion sense, even if she did say so herself, and always found it best to purchase locally, preferably the clothes off a local's back. Quick spritz of sanitizer and off you go, sally forth, get along little doggy etc. Barring that, well, she'd learned from an expert it was best to wear what you had on and dare any of the locals to mention it. They usually didn't. At the moment she just looked like an English eccentric amongst many.

The Hiberts hadn't given up their gothic gear, they'd just gone more Victorian, both of them powdered pale, heavily mascara-ed, and dressed in black from head to toe. The locals assumed they were in mourning, and couldn't have been nicer, which disappointed the Hiberts, though they tried not to let it show. The Cegas family, unfortunately, had dressed like the Von Trapps at their farewell performance.

The Recluse hadn't come out of course, but her companion had. Miss Sulie went for the generic Victorian look as well, dark red silk walking gown and a hat with a veil. Her ensemble was completely the wrong decade but the locals wouldn't know the difference. The veil was a wise

move on her part: Those 51st century 'fashion scars' would not look nearly as cool to Transylvanian villagers as they did to the youth on Habriuz.

Tom Wakeen looked awkward in his wool suit, stiff collar, and bowler hat — awkward, and a bit cute. And too young. He gave her a wink and she felt her face flush.

Dick still looked like a Dick.

It really hurt her time traveller's street cred she felt, when everyone in her time travelling group was staring abstractly into the middle distance waiting for translators to digest the regional dialect of the helpful native standing right in front of them, smiling and very helpfully pointing in the direction of the tavern about which they had painstakingly inquired in horribly garbled Romanian.

She'd become such a snob. And her face hurt from the relentless sunny-ness of her persona. It was hard, very hard to smile through a hangover y'all. At times like this Bernice wondered if she got sent on these 'missions' as a lesson in humility. Someone apparently thought she was getting too big for her breeches.

Late in the afternoon they were lost. The reconnoitre-bee had an accident with a stray cat and there was no point in launching a mini sub-orbitor since they were only going to be staying for a few hours, so they had rely on Babineaux's memory of the area, maps from the period, and directions from a farmer that were mostly warnings about wolves and gypsies out that way. And lo, if they didn't meet up with gypsies, the tribe Stoker wrote about too — Szgany Roma. It was pretty exciting really. Gypsy culture had been subsumed in the late 21st century after proto-viruses left so many ethnic groups sterile.

At first Bernice pretended she didn't know what they were saying. She'd taken the translation device YESTERWAYS LTD provided, of course, but she hadn't actually activated it. She didn't need it, but thought it best not to let that be known. The devices made everyone sound like eccentric English tourists translating from a guidebook. Which was fine in the 19th century, but elsewhere and otherwhens it was mortifying. Every time Nicos Hibert tried to order something in a local dialect Bernice winced in horror.

So there they were wearing necklaces of garlic, with little vials of holy water tucked into reticules and garish crosses gripped in their fists. Richard thought he was asking the gypsies if his group was on the right path to the castle of Dracul. The gypsies heard him ask if it was the way to Dracula. They discussed whether or not the gaje understood the meaning of that particular path.

'The Dragon died a long time ago,' one of the men explained, 'before our father's father's fathers were alive.' Bernice clarified that they were sightseeing and wanted to see the castle, not the man. Richard, annoyed with her interference, protested that they weren't interested in the man, he explained, but rather the legend of his descendent who was said to be a vampire.

The gypsies talked amongst themselves, speaking too low for Bernice to make out and too rapidly for the others to translate. Finally one of the men asked if the gentlemen and ladies wished to see a vampire.

Everyone understood that. 'Yes, that would be excellent.'

Ah, that was simple enough then. 'Besnik's Uncle Luca is a vampire.'

'I see,' said Richard. His mouth wavered between thin-lipped displeasure and an equally thin-lipped smile. He decided to be generous and assume there was a problem with translation rather than an attempt to con gullible tourists.

'We are speaking of the living dead, are we? Creatures who, after death, rise from their graves and drink the life's blood from friends and relatives?'

'Yes, yes. Besnik's uncle just like that except he don't drink their blood. He come back after he die to help his wife raise his sons. Got six of 'em. A handful, those boys.' The man shook his head, tsk-tsking.

There was a garbled sort of silence as translators digested this.

Bernice couldn't keep the grin off her face, even as she cocked her head and looked up at the speaker to challenge his bizarre assertion. 'You're telling us that a vampire rose from the grave to help his wife with the kids?'

The fellow didn't even blink, although she could see a bit of a twinkle in his eye. 'Yeah. How she gonna provide for them? They gonna be big boys. Christ rose for the sake of our souls. A dead man can't rise for the sake of his family?'

'Well, I suppose, when you put it like that.'

'Show Besnik your silver and he take you to meet his uncle Luka. You see for yourself.' He looked thoughtful, scratched his chin. 'But if you want to find your own vampire. Milosh here can smell them.' He jerked his thumb at the fellow next to him in the wagon then put his hand to his mouth in the classic theatrical aside, 'Moroi.'

'What?'

'Vampire detector,' Bernice explained.

Until that moment, the fellow Milosh had been little more than a slouched collection of loose clothes, rough jaw and sullen chin poking out sharply from under the floppy brim of his hat, but now, his scowling black eyes scanned the members of their party. His scowl settled on the veiled Miss Sulie. He muttered something in the other man's ear and then leaned back with his hands crossed over his chest in what was clearly a ritual warding against evil.

'Milosh says you should look to yourselves. You stink of vampire already.'

'What? What was that?' Is he saying that we smell?'

No,' Miss Sulie said, with an odd little giggle in her voice. 'He's saying that one of us is a vampire.'

A shudder started in Bernice's boots and practically lifted the hat off

her head in its rush up her spine. She caught Tom's eye and he looked stunned.

'It only acts like the the living you know,' Milosh said. The man next to Milosh flicked the reins and gave a sharp whistle, then a shout. The horses started forward, and the overburdened wagon lurched to a roll towards the Borgo Pass road.

She started after them calling, 'What does? Who? Who?' One of the men in the back of the wagon turned and spat three times in rapid succession. 'Mother save us from the gaje.' Milosh and his fellows were done with them.

Mrs Cegas discovered her authentic coin purse of the period was missing.

It was in someplace called Forks, Washington that Bernice had a brainstorm — an actual electrical storm in the brain that shorted out some motor functions. She wasn't the only one either.

The tour group had been lounging in a clearing in the forest on an assortment of blankets and folding chairs enjoying what Babineaux mistakenly referred to as a 'tailgate party'. Bernice didn't have the heart to correct him. Even if it wasn't the authentic tailgating party experience made popular at sporting events (one needed an authentic Sports Utility Vehicle for that), it was still a relaxing interlude in the technologically comfortable early-to-mid 21st century. With wine and cheese. The Pacific Northwestern territories hadn't even seceded from the US yet. The Confederated Counties of Texas wouldn't become the United States of Texas for another 100 years. It seemed like such a happy, carefree time — relatively speaking. Not only were they lounging about on nature's own lumpy mattress of rain forest detritus, they were also drinking pretty good champagne and were about to be enthusiastically entertained by the re-enactment of an epic battle between Native American Werewolves and European Vampire Interlopers as performed by the Edward and Bella Players from Port Townsend, Washington, USA.

Twilight settled over them like a cushy lap rug. Bernice had just finished off her third glass of bubbly, and was nibbling at huckleberries and creme fraiche. She'd allowed Tom Wakeen to stretch out with his head in her lap, thus giving all the impression of easy repose and possible hanky panky. Babineaux urged everyone to settle in for an evening of overwrought performance art.

Above their heads the spruce rustled like taffeta. The cries of birds and the sudden flap of their wings as they took flight stuttered through the air. A library hush descended, the wind through the trees like people coughing, pages turning. Then, a new and anticipatory silence followed, heavy as the smell of pine tar. The Edward and Bella Players appeared in a crunch of needles and leaves and separated into two groups, posed in tableau, the vampire delegation looking like so many Nosferatus (except wearing skin-

tight black bodysuits on really really fit bodies). The werewolf delegation was in loin cloths with stylized wolf head robes over their heads and shoulders. Also quite fit, the lot of them. Bernice was thinking the evening might prove to be one of the best evenings in recent memory, which was likely the champagne talking, but then again, she didn't have a chance to find out, on account of her happening to glance around contently and notice that Lilu, the Recluse had joined them. She jerked hard enough to dislodge Tom's head from her lap. He started to say something, but she had his arm in a vice grip.

Bernice recalled her first impression of the woman when the group had met up at the YESTERWAYS LTD caravan park&port — a Snow White, Rose Red kind of beauty, striking for its rarity in the modern age: extremely Caucasian, hair the colour of garnets, and eyes a striking deep blue. Of course now that she thought about it, that combination had always been rare on Earth. The Greeks believed that a woman with that colouring couldn't be anything but a vampire, which led to a lot of unnecessary hardships for the redheads of the world. But now, seeing Miss Lilu perched at the edge of a lawn chair, leaning forward in rapt attention, her entire body quivering like a struck wire, or a cat trying to keep its tail from twitching, Bernice realized why the Greeks might have got that impression. This was the kind of beauty that drowned sailors and lured travellers to tumble to their deaths into deep ravines. It was creepy and... compelling.

She watches the dancers, the stylized movements of their mock battle. Wolf and vampire tearing at each others throats, *her face alight with fierce desire*. She's waiting for this ritual to turn a key between the worlds. Spread the *robe* upon the mountain, unfold the rock, *reveal the hole* in the pocket so she can catch the things and close them up in a bag full of Universe. And she reaches out to pluck the hole from the sky...

Bernice blinked, just a blink, and between the close and open. of her eyelids, Lilu had leapt from her lawn chair to the centre of the performance. Everything and everyone else went slow motion, out of sync, one step ahead or behind but never where they intended to be.

The performers were scattered across the forest floor like pine cones. 'It's not here,' Lilu cried, her voice a roaring that split the sky. A shock of lightning and the next thing anyone knew they were all on hands and knees, whimpering, sobbing, groaning, hyperventilating, and in Bernice's case, swearing. The heavens opened up and the rain came down.

Richard Lux de Babineaux struggled to his feet, dazed and confused. 'This isn't supposed to happen. The weather was all arranged. We booked this night specifically!'

'Mr de Babineaux, sir, excuse me, excuse me sir,' Mr Cegas cried, jumping up and down, and waving his appendages like mad. 'I'm afraid my wife is going to be ill —' Mr Cegas' fears were proved a second later when Mrs Cegas vomited in the grass.

The other Mrs Cegas (Bernice called her v2) explained that Mrs Cegas (VI) was pregnant again, which was when Dick went a bit ballistic. It gave him something to focus on that wasn't rain he hadn't ordered, and a strange inexplicable shift in reality that made people throw up.

Good heavens! Temporal hopping wasn't good for developing fetuses! Hadn't they read the brochures? YESTERWAYS LTD had been assured there were no medical conditions that could be exacerbated by transtemporal journeys.

'Fertilization only happened yesterday Mr de Babineaux. We did not realize the mountain air and marinated funguses would prove so conducive to spontaneous conception. We have never been off home before, you know.' Mr Cegas protested.

'It's in all the brochures published for your species,' Babineaux sniffed. 'Which you would know had you bothered to read them. You should also know neither I nor my employers can be held accountable for any developmental problems down the road.'

There was nothing for it, Babineaux declared as he furiously folded lawn chairs and sealed up Tupperware containers, they would have to cut the trip short. Although refunds and even partial refunds were unlikely, he'd make certain that everyone received vouchers for future trips. Anything else they'd have to take up with Legal. He got out his Paymaster to settle with the manager of the Edward and Bella Players, apologizing profusely all the while. Apparently, everyone had decided to pretend that the whole incident was somehow the result of a pregnant Naxosan.

'What about the Gentleman?' Miss Sulie asked. Bernice had forgotten she was even present. 'We was to see the Gentlemen's lair, if you'll recall Mr Babineaux. So looking forward to it.' She had her arm around Miss Lilu, who seemed to be in a kind of walking swoon now.

'It's possible that Operations can retrieve the Cegas family from this century,' he said, 'And the rest of the group can finish the tour as scheduled. But I'm very sorry, Miss Sulie. I shouldn't count on seeing the Gentleman if I were you.'

Mrs Cegas VI began to cry, then sob, then wail, terrified and overwrought (which could only partially be due to her condition). Her husband and sister-wife tried to console her to no avail. Their children stood blinking in confusion before they too began to cry. There was an awful lot of crying going on.

'They isn't here. They isn't there,' Lilu whispered. 'They isn't anywhere.'

'Hush love,' her companion said, patting her distractedly.

Lilu looked at Bernice from under a curtain of shining hair. 'Napesht,' she said. But only Bernice was close enough to hear it.

Hugh Ferrous more closely resembled a pig than his associate le Cochon. Ferrous was a barrel-bellied man who didn't sweat enough to keep himself cool. A swathe of linen dipped in vinegar served that purpose and he was making great use of it as they dined. 'But you could have an entire ship full of tender cargo young sir! We ask only for the privilege of safe harbour, and the great honour of offering our open hands and hearts in friendship towards your master.'

'With the assurance of a possible trade arrangement in the future, of course,' le Cochon said, smiling. He was lean and not much taller than Mulo, with dark heavy lidded eyes that spoke of many lusts in constant need of gratification. He had greatly admired the furs Mulo had brought. Mulo confessed he did not know the names for the animals who'd worn those pelts, but that his master hunted them for sport.

'We can guarantee a ship full of fools to do with as he pleases. Young, fresh, boys, girls, virgins all I'll venture to assert. He can have as many as he wants.'

Mulo's master traded in furs and lumber, most that had never been seen before in these parts; exotic aromatic wood and the thick pelts of creatures that lived half a world away. Very rare and beautiful. Ferrous and le Cochon were interested in the location of his master's island kingdom. But the master's island was never in one place for long.

Instead of the thirty promised, they offered a thousand. 'And what will my master do with so many virgins?' Mulo asked.

'Fill his bed and his belly.' Le Cochon laughed low in his throat. It's what he would do. They seemed to forget, these men, though they were mortal themselves, that a thousand children did not sit in a pantry waiting to be eaten. They must be fed and kept alive until that point. They must be kept busy.

'Or he might sell them or trade them or offer tribute to his heathen gods,' Ferrous says waving his vinegar rag in the air dismissively, 'It is of no concern to us.'

Mulo leaned forward, 'A thousand pilgrims and all you ask in return is that he consider trading with you in the future? That is more than generous.' Suspiciously so. He slapped the table. 'We will take fifty. We will send our own vessel out from Damascus with the goods agreed upon and the trade will take place at sea. I will deliver your request to my master for his consideration. A cask of good French wine would do much to improve its reception.'

Le Cochon grinned triumphantly and banged his mug of beer upon the table.

They have arranged for five ships to carry the children to Jerusalem. They have also arranged with agents out of Damascus for brigands that will take

the ships and the children to slave markets in the east. The ships will then be filled with all manner of goods that will eventually be delivered overland into the coffers of these two clever merchants. His master's fine timber and rare pelts seem little in comparison. Mulo must put his faith in greed. Greed is the God of Iron and Pig. Who will be the wiser? Who will miss these children? Who will not prefer to believe they have gone into the Holy Land and live triumphant under the banner of the Christ? For it has been only a night and a day and already Marseilles is wondering what they will do with all these children now that they will not be walking to Jerusalem. Extra rubbish in the streets, overflowing bughouses, demands for food. Yes, yes, by all means Master Iron and Master Pig. Take these worthy souls off our hands.

Mulo had offered silent thanks to the old gods that spared him the burdens of hope and faith when his attention was drawn to a new noise amongst the constant rumble out in the public room. Iron slid back the door on their private dining room and the Pig leaned out for a look. 'More pilgrims,' he spat. Then his eyes widened and he laughed, 'or whores dressed like pilgrims. Can't tell.'

Mulo got up and looked for himself. These pilgrims were not children, but neither were they whores, although they gazed about the room with an utter lack of decorum. Three women escorted by one man. Pilgrims at the start of their pilgrimage, perhaps? Yet their garments seem too fine, too pristine, as if they'd pulled them over their heads and pinned them together fresh from the loom and just moments before entering the inn. He remembered something his master told him about a certain kind of demon.

'It's the smiles that give them away more than anything. No matter how hard they try they always end up looking as if they've never seen a bowl of beer or live chickens. Their clouts are always clean, even when their robes look dirty. And they'll smile, my son, they'll smile and show you the whitest, most perfect teeth ever to dazzle your eyes. That's how you'll know they aren't of this world.'

He was pondering this when one of the women swivelled her head his direction. In an instant he understood what his master had been telling him, and more than that, he knew, without ever having seen the woman before, exactly who and what sort of demon she was. Her very being screamed ENEMY. And she knew him as well. Oh, she knew him. Yes.

All reasoned thought left him. He ran.

Richard had no idea why they were in medieval France, that much was clear. He tried not to let on, but Bernice knew something was wrong. She tried to broach it as gently as possible. Gently for her. With him that is.

'But this is Marseilles in the Middle Ages,' she pointed out.

'A little programming mix-up. A visit to medieval Marseilles is on the itinerary of several deluxe packages. In fact, I believe the Children's

Crusade is part of Religious Follies and Atrocities. Very popular with school groups.'

'I see. Was there a famous vampire that stalked the Children's Crusade, Dick?'

'Richard, please, Miss Summerfield

'Richard. What's going on?'

'I've a call in to Operations. In the meantime why not enjoy the local colour? It's a real party atmosphere out there. I mean, the Children's Crusade? That was quite big.' He turned to the confused assemblage. 'Everyone remember to take your AMDs if you're going to eat the food. Ounce of prevention and all that —'

But the Cegases had no intention of venturing out of the caravan until they disembarked at YESTERWAYS LTD. They opted to spend the evening playing Uno with their own children. Nicos and Rasputina finally surrendered to the facts of their advancing years and were napping in a pair of loungers. But the Misses Lilu and Sulie presented themselves as full of adventure and raring to go. Marseilles! Ooh la la! Bernice glanced knowingly Tom's direction, but didn't let her suspicions at this sudden turn show. She pointed out that medieval Marseilles was not nearly as ooh la la as it would be in the 18th century and even then Paris in the 19th was actually the ooh la la capital of world history. Plus, it looked really really crowded out there. All those kids from the farmlands, middle of summer — stink-eee.

Once outside however the winds were favourable and the crowds seemed to present no problem for Lilu in her too-clean linen gown and fine wool mantle. The sea of unwashed humanity parted for her — not like the sea for Moses, but in little shifts and bends. She never stopped, never needed to step around or step aside as she moved through them, down from winding paths in the hills and eventually out into the square where the Abbaye St Victor greeted all pilgrims, blessed their holy mission by its very presence and sent them on their way to glory... or whatever.

Along the journey, Benny had been astonished to see actual hemp growing where Canebiere high street would someday be. And yet, as strange and familiarly unfamiliar as this Marseilles was, it wasn't a patch on how even the rubbish seemed in a hurry to get out of Lilu's way.

Once out in the square she moved unerringly, focused on a target only she could see, past the market hall and the arcades, down narrow lanes and out again to wider streets, towards a sprawling two story building that Bernice recognized as an inn. Sulie hurried along after her, with Bernice and Tom Wakeen, unacknowledged, unnoticed, walking the path she'd opened for them.

It was in the public room of that inn that Lilu spotted what she was after. Bernice turned just in time to see a boy about eight years old cry out and dive behind the planks of the bar. And then a whoosh past her ear and Lilu was gone. Benny stood there blinking like an idiot, people shouting,

crying out in confusion and alarm all around her. And then suddenly Tom had her by the elbow and they were racing through the darkening streets in pursuit.

By the time Tom had tracked Lili she had the boy pinned against the side of a warehouse, holding him there with her fingers locked around his throat. Benny could see the boy was unconscious, possibly dead, his body dangling limp against the wall. For a moment she could only stare stupidly — dead children were not on the agenda for this trip — and then Tom Wakeen pushed past her, shoving her into the wall in his hurry to face the deadly creature before them. 'Get back, creature of darkness,' he commanded. In one hand he brandished a souvenir cross and in the other a little medicine bag full of (judging by the smell) garlic. Benny was horrified.

'You told me you had weapons!' she hissed. Tom looked at her like she was incredibly dense. He shook the items in question. Yes, those were the weapons apparently.

When he'd contacted her, Tom Wakeen claimed to be descended from the medicine-men who'd driven the invader (known to Commanche as Nepesht) back to the spirit world and trapped it there. He'd also been a student of Dr Ramirez and confessed to having shared certain lore and sacred rituals with him. Possibly too much. Things he wasn't to reveal to anyone not in direct line of descent from the first medicine keepers.

It appeared that his own people hadn't shared anything really useful with him in the first place.

She resisted the urge to slap herself upside her own head, and then to slap him and then had to resist the greater urge to roll her eyes when Tom cried, 'Release him, foul creature.'

Lili didn't acknowledge his existence.

'I command you. Release the boy and face me.'

'Oh goddess,' Benny whispered.

But all Lili's attention remained fixed on her prey. 'Where is your master hiding, hmmm?' she asked him. 'Where is the coward?' She gave the boy a shake and his little legs flopped, heels beating against the wall. 'Answer me!'

'He can't!' Benny cried. 'He's dead! You've strangled him, you crazy bitch.'

The woman didn't spare her a glance. 'Not dead. Playing opossum. But I know the truth of mulo. You cannot kill mulo because mulo is already dead.' Lili pressed her face very close to the boy's, 'Isn't that right, mulo?' Her hand tightened around his throat. The boy's eyes popped open and darted to the side. Benny gasped. He was looking right at her. 'Help me,' he rasped out.

Her knees went wobbly and her hand slapped the wall to keep herself from collapsing.

'Release him!' Tom screeched. Something in his voice — the fear perhaps

— made Lilo turn her head slightly. Her tongue darted out, a quick hungry swipe at her lips as if she could taste it in the air -

Benny heard the knife drawn and punching into flesh, strangely amplified and instantly recognizable, as if these were sounds she'd heard a million times. The little boy's movements were blinding fast, his legs kicking, his arm thrusting and thrusting wherever the blade could find purchase in the gut, ribs, chest and sides of woman holding him.

Lilo grunted at the first stab, her grip on his throat slipping, which gave him just enough leverage to keep stabbing at her. But she soon held him fast again, and with a powerful swipe knocked the knife away, sending it clattering to Benny's feet. She stared at it too long, wondering if she should pick it up, and when she finally bent down to do it someone kicked it away. She saw Sulie pointing a weapon at her. Unlike Tom's cross and garlic, Sulie's was a very serious weapon that could disintegrate not only Benny, but the wall that was failing to hold her up.

Lilo swept the little boy creature into her arms cradling him in a vice grip against her body. Benny could see rends in her gown and cloak that were stained with dark blood, but she didn't seem to be bleeding from any of the wounds. Now we find our enemy and destroy him,' she said cheerfully. The boy mulo began to struggle again, wailing out his rage and frustration to no avail. There were a lot of children crying that night. And if any of the people of Marseilles took notice of their procession back to the caravan, they might only have thought Ah, *one* less child to stretch our Christian charity to the limits. Suffice it to say no one stopped them. Benny and Tom had little choice but to follow. Sulie's weapon was (as mentioned) a very serious one.

'You know this thing isn't working properly, right?' Benny pointed out.

'It worked to bring me closer to my enemy,' Lilo said. She was sat in the navigator's chair in the cabin of the caravan with the boy-thing in her lap. His arms and legs were wrapped and bound, mummy-style, with miles of silver duct tape.

Richard was in the pilot's spot. He'd been going for the emergency signal when Sulie disintegrated both it and the tip of his finger in a nice bit of marksmanship. At least Benny sincerely hoped it was. He hadn't stopped shaking yet. She'd be very surprised if he ever stopped shaking for the rest of his life. Benny herself had been duct-taped to the purely decorative steering column. Tom was locked in the loo, the lucky bastard. Sulie kept watch over the occupants of the caravan, all of them seated and strapped in, and trying not to look at her shiny gun. She'd taken Tom's little medicine bag and now had it around her own neck. Benny could hear the Cegas wives talking quietly to their children. She couldn't see the Hiberts but assumed they were all right. She wasn't sure if they should all be grateful they weren't abandoned there in the 13th century. She had to wonder why they hadn't been.

`Don't you have a ship?' she wondered aloud. Lilu looked at her with the same distracted intensity she gave everything. Benny shifted her bottom on the deck. "I mean, why are you travelling like this?" She tried to indicate the caravan and by implication the whole transtemporal experience. Which was not easy to do when bound to a steering column.

`Ship is dead,' Lilu said, 'I can never be another ship.'

`Uh huh.'

`But I can kill the enemy that killed us.'

`You don't need to tell her anything,' Sulie spat.

Lilu made a tsking noise at her. She stroked the mulo's head almost affectionately. 'And now, the mulo will show us the way.' He didn't look happy about it.

`What is a mulo anyway?' she asked. Keep asking questions. Get *as* much information as you can.

Surprisingly, it was Sulie that answered. 'A mulo is a vampire made and growed from a stillborn infant. So I been told.'

Which was more than Benny wanted to know, really, judging by the queasy feeling in her tummy. 'Huh, how's that work then?'

`Don't know. Don't know why anybody want to do such a thing in the first place. 'Less, of course, they happen to be evil. We ain't the bad guys here, Cheerleader.'

`Could've fooled me,' Benny muttered.

Sulie shrugged. 'Won't matter much in the long run.' She smiled unpleasantly. 'To you, I mean.'

Benny gulped hard, but pushed it further, directing her queries pointedly to Lilu. 'How is a mulo going to lead you to this enemy of yours?'

`Breath of blood. Blood of teeth. Teeth of heart.' She looked at Richard. 'Make it go now.'

`Go where?' Richard asked, his voice quivering.

`Just launch, Mr Babineaux,' Sulie said, then pointed her weapon at Benny's open mouth. 'You need to shut up now.'

The Giants and the Deer-People

One day Giant-woman said to her husband Giant-man, 'I have noticed that many of our best things have gone missing: a magic skinning knife, the magic cooking pot, the magic parfleches.'

`I have noticed this also,' said Giant-man. 'My swiftest horse is missing as well. I think I have seen the Deer-people near our camp.'

`Are you thinking what I'm thinking?'

`If you are thinking those Deer-people are thieves, then yes.'

`You cannot trust the Deer-people. They are like spirits and disappear even as you are looking at them. They already have too much magic.'

So Giant-man and Giant-woman went up to Deer Mountain.

The cave home of the Deer-people was guarded by a warrior holding a staff. Giant-man and Giant-woman introduced themselves. 'We are your neighbours from the valley.'

The Deer-man at the mouth of the cave looked shifty-eyed. 'Yes, we have seen you from afar.'

'Really? We thought we'd seen some of you in the valley and wondered why you never introduced yourselves.'

'You must have us mistaken for the Antelope-people. We Deer-people stay mostly in the mountains.'

'Must be good hunting here. You look well-fed.'

'We have some luck in that regard.'

'Even this late in winter? That is very lucky. For ourselves we must rely on the food we've preserved in our parfleches, which seem to have gone missing.'

'We have no need of those. We have everything we want whenever we want. Look.' The Deer-man pounded his staff on the rock three times and said, 'Buffalo calf.' Out trotted a buffalo calf.

Giant-woman recognized the buffalo calf as the same one she had put in her magic parfleche only yesterday. But she said nothing of this. 'Can you produce enough food for a feast? For a dance?'

'Of course,' said the Deer-man. He pounded on the rock three times again and called forth a buffalo cow, three antelope, ten rabbits, assorted fish, birds, dogs and a turtle. 'We will send an invitation to the valley the next time we hold a dance.'

Giant-man and Giant-woman thanked them and went away. They did not go far.

'They have stolen our things,' Giant-man said.

'Definitely,' Giant-woman agreed. They made a plan to steal the guard and waited until he needed to relieve himself. When Deer-man went behind a tree, Giant-man grabbed him and shook him until he dropped the staff. Then he ate him for good measure. Giant-woman picked up the staff and went to the cave. She hit the rock three times. 'Magic skinning knife. Magic cooking pot. Magic parfleches. Horses of my husband's. Come forth.' The knife, the pot and the parfleches came rolling out of the cave, followed by the horse.

The Deer-people gathered at the mouth of the cave. The head-man of the Deer-people came out.

Giant-man said. 'You have stolen our things of power. From now on you will be our food and will come when we are hungry for you.'

Some of the Deer-people wept, but their head-man said. 'So be

it. We will do as you command — until we won't anymore.'

'I suppose that's the most anyone can ask of such an arrangement,' said Giant-man.

Giant-woman opened her magic parfleches and the Deer-people walked into them.

'Where are we?' Babineaux whispered to her as they stepped from the caravan.

Benny knew immediately though the central chamber looked much larger now. And older. And...furnished. The floor wasn't concave anymore but flat and smooth, curving gently up to the cathedral-like ceiling over head. It also appeared to be well lit. In fact it was quite the little city. Yet somehow she recognized it as the place she'd explored years ago. Maybe that was stretching the limits of her own credulity, but she'd been travelling in that surprisingly bendable dimension called Time, and the feeling was gut-level — she'd been here before when it looked different. This feeling was accompanied by another feeling -

'We're under a lake,' she told him. 'Or what was once a lake...or will be.' She squared her shoulders and gave him a brave-little-toaster smile, 'We are, Mr Richard Lux de Babineaux, in the lair of the Texas Gentlemen. All part of the tour.'

He looked at her. 'You aren't really descended from Texas Cowboy Cheerleaders are you?'

"Fraid not. But I've been known to high kick when feeling enthusiastic. And I have been here before.'

Sulie was herding all of them out into the chamber. The Cegas in a centipede huddle, glommed onto each other, a mass of fluffy heads and hunched backs with their children at the centre. The Hibert's looked so frail. Bereft of their personas they seemed to be aging before Benny's eyes. Tom wouldn't look at her.

No one was crying yet even though this was the part where one usually commenced with the crying. The bit when you're about to be sacrificed to something for some reason you don't understand and wouldn't give a hoot about even if you did understand it because this is your precious life and you should be able to choose your sacrifices accordingly, damn it! That's the sort of thing that made a person want to rail against injustice. And also to beg quite a bit. Benny wasn't ready to beg just yet, but she was all for keeping it in reserve. Sometimes fervent begging bought enough time for a rescue.

Lilu had dropped her bound captive to the floor as soon as she stepped from the caravan. She walked to the centre of the chamber and stood there, her head tilted back, looking up at the ceiling in a such an extreme manner that Benny thought she might tip over backwards. Her red-gold hair was like a firefall down her back. She was the kind of being one ought not to look at too long. The terrible, beautiful sublime; a London skyline when

the bombs were falling. It didn't matter which war or which bombs, you were still going to die looking at it. Benny shuddered.

The mulo was suddenly next to her. He'd freed his legs and was working to free his arms. She didn't feel comfortable helping him out with that. 'I was supposed to bring many children.'

`Oh, well, hope he won't be too disappointed.'

He smiled. 'He won't be. The children were going to be bait to draw *her* here.'

Benny did a double take, but got no opportunity to grill him for particulars. A significant part of the answer chose that moment to appear with a soft jingle of bells. From the mulo's reaction she knew this was his master, and the mulo's master was her very own naked amnesiac, the one she'd found in this place when it was smaller, the one she'd visited in a psych-ward in a Fort Worth military hospital.

He stepped out of a hole in the cavern wall that hadn't been there a moment ago, dressed in classic Native American Modern — cowboy boots, jeans, fancy ribbon shirt, brown leather belt with a huge turquoise and silver belt buckle, and a black Stetson with a silver concho band on his head. His long black hair was braided with bells and breath-feathers.

He scanned the room, caught sight of her and smiled. She realized she'd been holding her breath and let it out with a whoosh. Crazy naked guy cleaned up real nice. Now, if only he wasn't still crazy.

Striding about, claiming the space with his body, the man circled the being at the centre, not looking at her. Lilu turned with him from her place in the centre, just her head at first then in slow sliding shifts of her body, so that they seemed to be acting out an ancient cosmology on a deeply personal level; a dance that could change course at any moment, and destroy all the little creatures at the periphery.

After he'd walked the circuit, he went to the fissure he'd stepped through in the glossy surface of the chamber wall. With his fingertips he grabbed the edge of it and peeled it away. Then he rolled it up and put it in his jeans pocket. Lilu's eyes narrowed.

`You will not escape as easily as that, Nepesht,' she said. 'Not again.'

`I can't escape you Utlunta, as you can never escape me.' He began circling her again. 'We are bound. The last enemies. The last of our kind.'

Her chin went up. 'I will find my heart — that you *have stolen* — and grow another and another and all these...' Her arm swept out to indicate the tourists and, by implication, everyone else currently in the universe, 'will be my blood fuel and fodder. I will ride winds of the blue sun and devour all that I see.'

Behind Benny, Sulie moaned. She turned and saw the weapon, aimed at nothing in particular, and all the more dangerous for it. Sulie's other hand clutched at her chest, grabbing at medicine bag she'd taken from Tom Wakeen.

'That age is gone,' Nepesht was saying. 'The time of the mighty Utlunta is over. Don't you remember?'

'You stole from us. And then we caught you. But you tricked Utlunta. Trapped us — oh!' Lilu's eyes were huge, and she turned and turned in the centre of the chamber, searching for something.

Sulie fell to her knees on the hard floor, the weapon trapped between the cavern floor and her palm like it was fused to her flesh. The fingers of her other hand squeezed convulsively over the medicine bag looped around her neck.

Tom Wakeen's eyes narrowed as he watched her, as if he'd suddenly got it. He took a step toward her and the hand with gun came up. She snarled at him, a wounded animal sound.

'Only you and me now,' Napesht said.

'I remember. I remember —' Lilu squeezed her eyes shut and put her hand to her forehead. When she opened her eyes and looked up, Benny gasped. She wasn't the only one.

There were stars in her eyes. Literally. A cosmic cyclone stirring inside them. 'I don't want to go back. I won't. Trapped with my enemy forever. No. NO! I just got out!'

Sulie let out a screech, tugging at the medicine pouch blindly, madly. Tom saw an advantage and took it.

He ran at her, grasped the pouch and jerked hard as he danced away, breaking the leather string and cutting a line across the back of her neck as he did so. She fell forward gasping. He stumbled back a few steps, astonished at his success then let out a whoop. He held the pouch high in a fist, the broken strings dangling down -

In one of those horrible slow-motion moments, Benny saw Sulie haul herself up to hands and knees, then to a crouch, rising and turning in one motion, the weapon charging in her hand -

'Tom!' Benny screamed. He whirled, face lit up with a crazy joy, only to fall in confusion at her horrified expression. The bag flying from his hand in a lazy arc just as Sulie fired her weapon and he was dust.

For a long long time, all Benny could hear was the whoosh of her blood pumping, her heart beat, her breath in and out, and then the other sounds — children crying, parents crying, 'oh goddess, oh goddess,' someone else was saying and 'I want to go home Nicos, take me home.'

She drew in a shuddery breath, focused on the too-bright centre of the universe — a pale woman in a pale gown with fire for hair, and blue stars for eyes. And a dark-skinned man with silver-tipped cowboy boots and a silver crown for a hatband. They were beautiful. Like bombs falling or stars colliding.

The man took something out of his pocket (his chest, his head) and shook it out, unfurled and snapping like a crisp clean sheet of purest black. It floated to the floor of the cave and settled into it, but instead of a blacker shade of black on the black floor, there was a faint bluish glow coming up

out of it, and a distant rhythmic sound, drums, voices too far away to be understood even if you knew the language.

Lilu's eyes were locked onto the dark man Nepesht, but she was shaking her head, foot sliding back. Nepesht looked at Benny and held his hand out, palm up, open and waiting. Did he want her to come with him to that world inside the hole? She couldn't. She didn't want to. She -

He curled his fingers, opened them out and curled them in again. She looked down at her own hands. There was the medicine bag. It felt heavy and soft and squishy like something a little bit alive. She tossed it to him. He caught it.

From the hero cycle of Lost Boy and No-Name

'There is something over that hill I do not want you to go near,' said Mouse-woman to her adopted son No-Name. Naturally, he was anxious to find out what this thing was and ignored his mouse mother's fears as she was only a mouse and afraid of everything. He went to the hill and poked his head over the top, and as he did so something began to suck in the air, draw it into itself, along with all manner of things, and so No-name was drawn in also; and as he went in he saw people and animals, some dead, others dying. The something was a great blue serpent. No-Name reached out and touched the kidneys of the thing and asked what they were. 'That is my medicine, do not touch it.' Then No-Name reached up and touched its heart and asked what it was and the serpent said, 'This is where I make my plans.' No-Name smiled to himself. He said, 'You make plans, do you?' and he cut out the heart. The serpent cried out, dying. No-Name cut between the ribs of the serpent and liberated the people and animals that were living, and took a piece of the serpent's heart and hid it in the magic pouch Mouse-woman had given him.

Nepesht cried, holding the medicine pouch high the way Tom had done. He looked at Benny, then at everyone in the chamber. They were all waiting to see how they would die. Only Sulie, sat on the ground, legs splayed awkwardly, tears streaming down her face, didn't look back at him.

'We have troubled your world enough,' he said. 'We will return to our little prison and make of it a home.'

'I wish to be free, Nepesht.' Lilu said.

He shook his head, smiling sadly at her. He showed her the pouch. 'This is your heart, Utlunta. Do you not recognize your own heart?'

Lilu drew in a tiny stuttering breath. Nepesht dropped the pouch into the hole in the floor. 'You must follow your heart.'

Lilu's eyelids slid shut and she tipped her head sideways and leaned,

letting herself fall into the hole in the floor. Nepesht followed, stepping off the edge of black to drop into the hole, boots first. By the time Sulie had scrambled across the cavern floor to dive in after them, Nepesht had reached out, pulled the hole in after him and put it in his jeans pocket.

Benny was at the bar with a pepricot martini and her diary open before her when Richard Lux de Babineaux took the stool next to her.

'Still have your job?' she asked.

'Yes, in fact. They wouldn't want me to sue after all.'

'Oh quite. That'd put a damper on YESTERWAYS Classic Invasions of Earth Tours.'

He ordered what she was having though she warned him it was a bit on the sweet side. 'Obviously you knew something about the situation when you booked the tour, Miss Summerfield.'

'Well, some. I was trying to find out who killed some colleagues and keep myself from being next in line. And I found out some stuff and then more stuff.'

'Did you find out what they were?'

'Not exactly, but they *were* the last two of whatever they were. Legend says Nepesht and Utlunta were the last of two different space-faring races that lived ages ago. The Utlunta ships were supposedly fuelled by the blood of the races they conquered. I'm pretty sure that part is myth, but it is likely the ships were operated by some sort of organic interface with the operator. There's a lot of precedent for that. Anyway, according to legend, nearly every intelligent species in the galaxy fell prey to them, except for a plucky little bunch with a technology — or possibly a biology — that enabled them to raid Utlunta ships by means of pocket universes. They kept their race from enslavement when nearly every other species succumbed. But that meant that they would always be hunted, would never be safe or free. So the plucky little bunch figured a way to kill the Utlunta ships and save the galaxy and themselves into the bargain. In order to do this one of their own — a great leader — had to draw them into his pocket universe and be trapped with his mortal enemies forever. Forever is a long time and he went a bit crazy, forgot why he was there, and escaped. According to a theory put forth by an associate — one of the dead ones — Nepesht escaped into Earth during the era of the pueblo Tigua Indians in Texas. Some of us were pushing for Mogollon in New Mexico or the Hohokam in... which... is absolutely beside the point. Sorry. Suffice it to say that when he escaped so did his enemy who, instead of walking out onto Earth, ended up flung out into distant time and space, weakened and crippled and also the only one left. Don't ask me how, because I don't know.'

Richard pondered this, sipped his martini, found it refreshing, and said, thoughtfully, 'It does seem far-fetched and I was *there*.'

Benny chuckled. 'Yes, well, far-fetched is where I live these days.'

He looked into his glass as if it were a deep deep well. 'Miss Summerfield,

could you tell me what became of the boy those women took captive in Marseilles? It's been troubling me since we were rescued. He simply disappeared after we got back here. And if what they said about him was true, well, that couldn't be good could it? A child vampire wandering about

'Oh, sorry, I should have mentioned it. My friend found him a job. He's being trained as a caretaker at the haemavore nature preserve on Vikramaditya. He'll fit right in.' She gulped down the last of her drink and reached over to give him a farewell pat on the shoulder. 'It's been fun. I mean, some of it was fun. I don't plan on doing it again.'

'But Miss Summerfield, you're due an all expense paid dream tour of your choice to anywhen courtesy of YESTERWAYS please-don't-sue-us LTD. Compensation for your suffering. I'm only asking that you not book one of mine. It's not that I haven't grown to appreciate your good qualities, it's just...'

'Don't sweat it, Dick. I have no intention of ever booking a trans-temporal tour in the 51st century again.'

'Is there another century where you'll find booking for time travel more amenable?'

Benny smiled and leaned in for a conspiratorial whisper. 'I have this friend. He says he'll give me a lift to anywhen anytime I want one.'

Richard looked suitably shocked. 'Goodness. What does he want in return?'

Benny pondered this and then declined to answer.

EPILOGUE

Adonia Parish Asylum. Flox, Habriuz
37th of Twelve Spring, 5020

Dr Grimaldi led the man from the Agency to the small room where the patient could be observed without her knowing.

'She makes "holes" out of everything,' he was explaining to the man, 'Paper, shoes, blankets, every item of clothing she's issued, even underpants —'

'She makes them, you say? But she doesn't dig holes?'

'No, sir. No, that's the curious thing. Although when you know what she's attempting it makes more sense.'

'And what is that?'

'Well, near as we can tell, she seems to believe she can slap a hole onto a surface, leap through, and escape.'

'Has she tried mathematics?' the man from the Agency asked with a supercilious smirk.

Dr Grimaldi realized the joke wasn't particularly funny but thought he ought to laugh for the sake of appearances. One didn't like to get on the wrong side of people from the Agency. His laugh was therefore a trifle nervous and forced. 'She's mathematically average,' he then offered. 'Grew up in the labour camps before the Liberation. If you'll notice the... the scars.'

'Yes. Why don't these people ever get them fixed? Why do they insist that everyone needs reminding of the past?'

'I could give you the psychological reasons, if you —'

'No thank you. I've heard them all.' He gestured at the woman in the cell with a vague flutter of his hand. 'And how does she go about making these holes then?'

Dr Grimaldi sighed. 'She draws them, she sculpts them, she pours them onto surfaces and attempts to dive into them. She once created a magnificent hole out of excrement. She's broken her ankles four times trying to jump into shadows. Fractured her skull same way. All treatment has proved short-lived or completely ineffectual. And now, nothing short of restraint and heavy sedation keeps her from injuring herself in these attempts. It's a very challenging case as you can see from the reports.'

The man from the Agency gave a noncommittal grunt. 'And has she told you why she needs to escape by this method?'

Suddenly, the woman looked up. Even though she couldn't possibly see the two men on the other side of the wall, she seemed to be looking right at them as she screamed an answer to the question she also couldn't have heard —

'I'm trying to follow my heart!'

Predating the Predators

Philip Purser-Hallard

Accompanying note from Prof. I.G. Ikigikato

Pendremellessen —

Attached is everything I've been able to find on the Murigen Infraction. Personally I think it should be plenty.

The two central accounts I've cobbled together from personal effects preserved by the family of the late Meinir Doihara, and from the paper files at the Pope Beatrix II Memorial Library. With two exceptions, the other excerpts are from transcripts still held in the library at FCU — there's plenty more where those came from, although their value as evidence is circumstantial at best.

While the involvement in the affair of the young Imogen Tantry (as she then was) is relatively well known, I was surprised to find that one of Cwm's pet subjects, our old friend Bernice Summerfield, was also present. A relevant fragment of her diary survives, along with a rare voice recording. I begin to wonder whether there were any mysterious historical events of the 27th century which Summerfield wasn't at.

Have a look through the bundle, anyway, and let me know what you think.

— IGI

Sunday 18 June:

The reason I have not updated this journal for the past two weeks is twofold. Firstly (and I suppose fortunately, although it did not seem so at the time), our journey aboard the *Serene* Diameter was uneventful, offering little by way of incident to record. Secondly my bunkmate, a pleasant enough woman named Fourteen Xiu, appeared unaccountably fascinated by my life as a priest, and I felt some concern that if she were to learn of this book's existence she might read it in my absence.

There is little enough here to pique her interest, to be sure, but nonetheless I preferred to maintain my privacy.

Fathers Finlay and Duke, being bunked together, will not have encountered equivalent difficulties. I wish that Mother Kaur had been able to join us at the conference, but the Church was unwilling to subsidise a fourth attendee. Despite what my own father and sister persist in suggesting, in the academic sphere the Church is no more 'cushy' an employer than any other, and since my ordination I have more often found it irksome than otherwise to be no longer my own mistress.

Doubtless this obedience brings its own rewards. I certainly recall the principle being repeated often enough at the seminary, and Fr Finlay still finds occasional satisfaction in reminding me of it.

Today we have finally emerged from our shipboard incarceration into the light of Murigen's smallest sun, fiery blue Nemhain. While welcome, our liberation from the rigours of travel is relatively short-lived, for I write this in the passenger lounge at the spaceport, awaiting the shuttle which is to fly us a quarter of the way across the northern hemisphere to the First Colonial University of Murigen.

Fr Finlay is tired and impatient, and keeps trying to start arguments with me or Fr Duke to alleviate his boredom. Duke has developed a habit of heartily agreeing with everything Finlay says, which only serves to irritate him the more.

By shipboard time, it is late evening, and I am very tired. By Nemhain it is not quite noon. The conference is scheduled to last a week, and our return, like our outward journey, will take us nearly a fortnight. In all, I will have been absent for over a month from my academic and pastoral duties at St Francis Xavier.

We are summoned to our flight. I will continue once we have arrived at the University.

Later:

Cramped our shuttle may have been, but the view which its windows afforded of Murigen's surface came as a welcome prospect after the Diameter's featureless bulkheads.

From a geologist's perspective Murigen must be an apathetic, lacklustre world, for the landscape which we observed during our transit is extremely flat. Water is plentiful, but the few seas are saltwater puddles with ideas above their station.

True dry land seems to be equally scarce, however. It seems that most of Murigen's surface lies at the level of its water-table, meaning that the majority of the landscape consists of marshland. This proportion has been steadily reducing since the joint human-Lavellan colonial teams first arrived on Murigen. I gather that their programme of 'light-touch terraforming' appears to be a rather grandiose turn of phrase for work that mostly consists of old-fashioned drainage.

Colonisation has made other marks upon the land. There are large plantations of wetland forests, of mixed Lavellan and Earth species. The land is mottled with verdant paddy fields, and areas of lush orange bloom which I understand to be a Lavellan water-crop. An interminably branching complex of canals evidently serves in place of highways, providing transport for the populace and their goods. From a high altitude the swamps of northern Murigen resemble a cracked grey tombstone, overrun with variegated blooms of lichen.

As we began our descent Nemhain was setting in the west, causing the lakes and waterways to shimmer with reflected light in a surprising cobalt blue. Settlements began to resolve themselves, consisting (as we were able to see during the latter part of our descent) either of Lavellan dam-dwellings or of stilt-houses connected by elevated walkways. The latter each cast two long half-shadows, one illuminated by Nemhain's blue light, the other by that of crimson Macha, largest of Murigen's three suns, now rising in the east to replace her stellar sister.

'If only their spiritual fertility matched that of their farms,' Fr Finlay observed as we overflowed one unusually fecund Lavellan farmstead. I knew from his sly glance in my direction that he was attempting to bait me again, knowing (as well he should, having helped to examine my doctoral thesis) that I differ from the orthodox view regarding the Lavellans, and

all those sentient species whom the Church has traditionally considered unsouled.

I would not rise to the bait, being fatigued from our journey and interested in the final stage of our descent; and having already experienced more than enough of Fr Finlay's coping strategies during the voyage from Earth.

I respect Finlay greatly, not only as a gifted theologian but also as a priest skilled in pastoral care. His work as a young man among the populations of the former Iterative Division worlds was particularly inspiring. The immutability of his faith, which led on more than one occasion to his incarceration by the Fractions, is something to which those of us who often fall prey to doubt and self-questioning (and I fear we are the majority, even among the clergy) can only aspire. Despite some appearances, he is also a tolerant man, whom (though much my elder) I consider a friend despite our differences in the arena of xenotheology.

However, due perhaps to his experiences among the Fractions, he does not respond well to situations over which he has no personal control. The necessity of surrendering that control during space- and air-travel must be a particular trial to him.

We were by now approaching the campus of the First Colonial University, and I could already see that it was very different in character from any other settlement I had yet seen on Murigen, including the frankly ugly prefabricated spaceport buildings. It is clear that much of the corporate investment which subsidised the original joint colonial teams has found its application here.

The campus occupies the slopes and summit of an artificial hill, assembled from soil and rock removed in deepening the nearest sea, and raised up on the margins of one of the few areas of rocky land. This latter is the site of Ravensfoot, the planet's largest human city and de facto capital.

As we alighted I was impressed, firstly by the murky odour drifting from the nearby swamp; secondly, and more pleasantly, by the scale of the campus buildings. These are quite unlike anything out in the wetlands, or indeed most of those visible on the distant Ravensfoot skyline.

Constructed of the rare local stone, the buildings follow the clean, tapering style of some of the more architecturally literate 25th-century colonies, with wide windows and doorways and decorative stonework spirals climbing the walls like ivy. The style works to better effect in the pale marble of Entruria or Haldane than in the duller grey of Murigen sandstone, which tends to loom dark and rather ominous against the ruddy sky. Perhaps it looks cheerier under the third sun, Fea.

The whole campus is designed for human-Lavellan cohabitation, and running waterways (fed, I presume, by pumps located somewhere at the summit) flow continually around and down the hillside. These form a secondary transport infrastructure for the aquatic students and staff, who

swim alongside and may cross over onto the pavements and pathways used by the humans. Internally, most of the rooms are on two levels, so that a portion of each may be ingeniously flooded for the comfort of the Lavellans.

There are additional facilities for accommodating the varied demands of academics from other species. A University is necessarily required to be cosmopolitan beyond the normal bounds of joint colonial society, the conference which begins tomorrow morning being a case in point.

But I am, as I say, very tired, and have written sufficient for tonight. My room is warm, its air-conditioning filtering out the ubiquitous swamp smell of the world outside. Macha is setting, once again tingeing the world, and my room, blood-red. I will continue this account once I have slept.

SupraLight Information Package from Lloyd Doihara, M.Phys., to Ms Meinir Doihara

FCU, Sunday 18 June

Sis!

How's stuff? All good I hope, with the live-in boyf and the tie-wearing job and all.

Mum and Ma still can't figure out why you'd ever want to move to a backwater world like Cheiral when all the swampland you could hope to farm was waiting for you here. Whereas I say, if you prefer to work for Transworld Logistics Inc, high up in your air-conditioned office in some Cheiral cloud-city — probably overlooking any number of beaches full of buffguys sunbathing in tiny shorts — rather than wade thigh-deep through honest Murigen mud like your mothers before you, enjoying that special bond which only exists between a smallholder and her water-buffalo — then who am I to argue?

Especially since I'll be applying for any dryworld research post I can filter up the minute I finish this doctorate. (Don't tell M&M that yet, obv.)

Seriously, Mein, hope it's all going good. And tell that Riq I'll kick him through a cloud-city window unless he treats you properly. I don't trust that lad, he still owes me beer.

So — how's life, as I'm sure you'll be wanting to know, here in my rather less upstorey ivory tower overlooking the wetlands of the dear old Bogworld?

Not too bad, actually. Turns out everyone in academia's as mad as venom-toads, yours truly included, but that's not news.

I don't know if you remember my pal Gonzo — you'll've met him when you've been to visit, but he's not the kind of guy to catch your discerning eye. Tall, thin, painfully studious, hair up in a ponytail just in case it makes him look like less of a twat, which oddly it doesn't. Started Uni in my year and on my course, but gave up Physics and moved to Interdisciplinary

Studies, where he's become something of a rising star. He got his doctorate in record time on account of having no life, and now he's some kind of research associate in the Indy Stud Dept. I take him out and hose him down with beer now and then as a public service.

Anyway. He's been King of the Stress-Bunnies lately because of this big conference they've got him organising. I didn't know much about it till I dragged him out last night to Groundhog Zero, figuring if someone didn't cushion his brain with beer soon his head might come apart. Of course he only came 'cause he wanted someone to stress at, so we ended up talking anyway about his wetrot conf.

Which, as it turns out, is all about vampires.

'Vampires?' I said to him, finding this surprising. 'What, fangy creature-of the night vampires? Undead bloodsucking fiend vampires? Inexplicably allergic to sunlight, garlic and obscure religious paraphernalia vampires? Or is this some other phenomena which academics call "vampires" but I'm not sad enough to have heard of?'

'No, those are the ones,' Gonzo said calmly. Despite my best effs he was on the shandy. He might as well have been drinking swamp runoff for all the cheer it was giving him. (Mind you, as far as taste went, so might I.)

'How in Dagon's ditch did you swing that?' I asked.

I knew Gonz was a big fan of vampire flims and veers and stuff, even going back to the old paper and celluloid media they were based on. Well, you know I kind of enjoy that stuff myself. Back when we were undergrads with more free time than we knew what to do with, we ran a Historical Horror Society together for a few terms, before it wallowed and went under.

But that was, you know, a hobby. These days I'm supposed to work. (So Prof Leustassavil seems to think anyway, and the Uni agrees with her — I checked.) It turns out Gonzo's getting paid for watching overly camp guys in fake fangs delivering lines like 'Ze children of ze night! Vat sweet music zey make!'

Which hardly seems fair.

I spent a while outlining this position to Gonz, who got a bit irky about it. 'It's not just the media stuff,' he said. 'There are real-world implications. It's obvious the vampire legend has some truth behind it. Indy Stud's all about getting the overview, looking at the big picture across all the academic fields. If what you're looking for is vampires, there's evidence everywhere. You find medical papers about infective agents causing haemophagy, criminological studies of murderers obsessed with bloodletting, archaeologists unearthing sacrificial victims who've been impaled and beheaded, historians mentioning just in passing that one particular aristocrat has a long line of descendants who all look exactly like him, even though none of them ever seem to have got married...'

I waved my arms. 'Stop! Gonz, I know all this. We used to talk about it all the time. You've got a shelfful of books about it.'

'Yeah — by fringy loons like Sojourner Rabinowitz-Walsh Damon.' Gonzo had that toad-gleam in his eye by now. 'Not reputable academic studies. If vampires are real, it impacts all kinds of areas. That's exactly the sort of thing Indy Stud should be looking at. That's what this conference is all about.'

'But how would the physics of it work, Gonz? That's the bottom line, isn't it? I mean, the stuff vampires are supposed to do is just impossible. Shapeshifting — well OK, there are shapeshifting species, like the Mim. But a human turning into a bat? Where's all the extra mass going to go? Or if it just gets denser, how's it fly? And then there's turning into smoke and re-forming — again, your high-end nanoware can do that, but someone's body? And that's without going near the "Look Ma, no reflection!" thing, which doesn't make sense from any angle.'

'Yes, yes,' Gonzo agreed. 'You're not the only one who remembers HiHoSoc.' (He was right, this was basically a précis of our drunkenest conversations back then.) 'I'm giving a paper on Thursday, trying to handwave some of the anomalies.'

'You are?' I was a bit irked at that. Conf appearances mean big career points, and we don't get many of the things here. Not ones I'm qualified to contribute to, anyway. 'But that's all our stuff. We talked about it together. You're not even a physicist any more!'

Gonz smirked. 'You know, that's true. And as it happens, what with organising everything else about this conference, I haven't had time to write a word of it. D'you fancy working something up instead?'

I gaped at him like a stupid thing. 'You big plasmo! You came out just so you could ask me, didn't you? I wondered why you didn't put up a struggle. Yeah, course I'll give it a go. You twat,' I added, because he is.

So that's how I got to be part of Gonzo's First Interdisciplinary Conference on Vampirology. Of course, telling me all this Saturday night doesn't give me buckets of time to prep for my Thursday talk, but that's the fast-paced world of academia for you.

And yeah, I really should be having a splash at the thing now, cheers for asking.

Conf starts tomorrow am — by rights I should spend the day pumping away at my talk (or — if you listen to Prof Stassy — doing something called 'the job I actually pay you for' in a mysterious place known only as 'the lab'). But — well, how can I resist listening to renowned experts in all kinds of fields, talking solemnly about the study and classification of the undead? My younger, geekier self would never forgive me.

So, I'll slip you in the eve and let you know what crops up. Bound to be wacky, zany fun all the way, I reckon.

Love and all that wetrot, Sis. You know the drill.

Lloyd

From the journal of Imogen Tantry

Sunday 18 June, continued:

I should have realised that 'night' on a world with multiple suns is liable to be at best a negotiable prospect. A short while after Macha's vermilion rays faded altogether from the horizon, the third and hottest sun, Fea, cleared the city rooftops to the east. Its white light quite flooded my room, and I was obliged to spend some time finding a housekeeper who would lend me a set of opaque blinds.

She was a friendly, motherly person, and the first Lavellan I have met. Not having investigated her species before I arrived on Murigen, I had been expecting a biology akin to that of Earth's amphibia, but the Lavellans I have observed since my arrival are covered with sleek black or russet fur. They look more like otters or beavers than frogs or salamanders, though far more closely adapted to their waterborne lifestyle.

Though I found her basking in a work-pool, the housekeeper came up onto the dry floor of her store-room in order to procure my blinds. She walked upright, perhaps a metre and a half tall, her flat head hinging forward on a broad thick neck. Her round flippers and broad tail slapped the flagstones wetly as she walked. She was naked except for a pouched apron, her fur slick and glistening in Fea's glare. She smelt of wet fur, with a undertone of perfumed chemicals which could have been cleaning solvents or furcare products.

'We don't mind the suns,' she said in scarcely accented English, as she fussed about preparing the blinds for use. 'We just uses Earth days and gets on with it. I s'pose the Splashers thought that would be easiest.' 'Splashers' I understood to be the typically irreverent name given by the inhabitants of Murigen to their founding colonists. 'We're used to it, though — we sleeps soundly even under fierce old Fea, and we works happily through the darks, even the long ones.'

She added that it was, by local reckoning, a little later than midday.

As I should have realised, the disposition of the suns and their respective daylight periods varies, not only throughout Murigen's own year, but according to the orbits of Fea and Nemhain about Macha. Apparently one of the largest faculties here at the University (which will, as far as I know, be playing no part in our conference) exists for the exclusive purpose of studying the stellar and planetary dynamics of this peculiar system.

Murigen turns about its axis every eighteen or so hours, but the locals ignore this as wisely as they do the comings and goings of the lights in their sky. At present, the northern hemisphere is passing through a rare phase when its only true nights are brief periods of darkness preceding and succeeding Fea's passage. 'Come September we'll be celebrating Equilateral Day,' the housekeeper told me cheerfully, 'and that won't happen again in our lifetimes.'

As I write, the white sun is in decline, and we may expect another hasty bout of nighttime before azure Nemhain returns to relieve her.

I have draped the blinds, but Fea's light still seeps around their edges. In any case, I suspect that my body-clock is too disoriented for sleep. At least the conference is not scheduled to start until tomorrow morning.

The housekeeper's kindness and sympathy to a stranger did her much credit. I wish that more of those within the Church who take a dogmatic view of the so-called 'unsouled' could see the Christlike virtues which so many members of these species practice in their daily lives.

Although I was unfamiliar with the particulars of their biology before arriving here, I have long known of the Lavellans as an example of what we xenotheologians call the 'Lithian Question'. Very few species altogether lack that generic religious impulse which has given rise to three billion or more faiths on the hundreds of thousands of known inhabited worlds, yet the Lavellans are one such.

No home-grown religion has existed on Lavella, even in the primitive eras of its people's development. Nor are there any Lavellan converts to faiths originating in other cultures. A secular xenobiologist would say that the Lavellans lack the 'God module' in the brain (for humanity it is the temporal lobe) where in most species religious experiences and feelings are, depending on one's interpretation, either perceived or generated.

While not strictly relating to the topic of the conference for which the Fathers and I have come to Murigen, there are sufficient parallels between the unsouled and the creatures we are here to study for a comparison to be instructive, and I am hoping that there will be Lavellan scholars contributing their perspectives at the event. Their voices are worth listening to, for all our inability to see in them a reflection of ourselves.

Monday 19 June:

I was awakened from fretful sleep by Fr Duke. Fea had just risen once again.

My recently adjusted timepiece told me that it was 5:30am.

As soon as I opened the door he spoke. 'Imogen. Hope I didn't wake you. This sunlight, huh?'

'I know,' I said. 'I've hardly slept.'

Prior to our current excursion, I knew Duke only by reputation, as one of the Church's pre-eminent moral philosophers and a feather in the cap of the University of Notre Dame, where he has been tenured for some ten years. Aboard the *Serene Diameter* I inevitably came to know him moderately well. He is a large man in his fifties, bearded and balding but very imposing physically. His demeanour is peaceful and his presence calming, a quality which presumably arises from a tranquil understanding of God's omnipresent love, and which occasionally moves me to want to punch him.

On this occasion however he seemed concerned, I might almost say agitated. I asked him if everything was all right, using his first name as he had mine. He is a man with whom it is all but impossible to stand on ceremony.

'It's Tony,' he said, meaning Fr Finlay. 'I've done my best to talk to him, but he won't listen. Now it's your turn.'

I was befuddled by long hours of semi-wakefulness, preceded by two weeks of enforced indolence. I said, 'What have you been trying to talk to him about?'

He rubbed his cheeks wearily before answering. He replied, 'Just come see him. He respects you.'

I went with Duke to the rooms assigned to Finlay, where I found my fellow priest pacing restlessly, his hands held behind his back as always when he is angry.

He nodded when he saw me. 'Imogen,' he said. 'I'm afraid we must pack our things and leave. We're withdrawing from the conference. Staying here is too risky, both diplomatically for the Church and for us personally.'

'Withdrawing?' I repeated stupidly. 'Tut it was your idea to come here.' I must have looked dismayed. The prospect of returning to the spaceport and precipitately climbing aboard another vessel, only to spend another half-month suffocating in its bowels, was an utterly miserable one.

'I was deceived,' he retorted shortly.

I have never found in Fr Finlay a man susceptible to argument, especially once his mind has been made up. That fixity of faith which I have often admired comes allied with an obstinate belief in his own rightness which it is all but impossible to shake.

I have called Finlay a tolerant man, and so he is. He tolerates the dissenting opinions of others because of his immovable conviction that they cannot for a moment threaten his own position. If some aspect of this conference had succeeded in offending him, then it was something I had never seen him encounter previously.

'What is the matter?' I asked, simply.

I could hardly argue against a point of view I did not understand.

'Show her, Luke.' Fr Finlay's suggestion to Fr Duke, his senior in academic standing even if his equal in the church, fell just short of being an order. Duke sighed, and brought from the pockets of his academic gown a standard conference pad in bronze-coloured plastic, embossed with the title of the conference.

I had found one identical to it awaiting me on my arrival in my own room, and had already spent sleepless hours assimilating its contents without discovering anything to alarm me. Duke slid a thick finger across the spine-icons, calling up a specific display which he then handed to me. In confusion I scanned the list of speakers, looking for anybody I might find objectionable, or failing that remotely notable. 'Professor Summerfield looks rather a lot like President —'

Not her,' Finlay snapped. 'The keynote speaker. Dr Valeriani.'

I had the impression that I was irritating him. Perhaps it was merely that he was irritating me.

I pored for a minute over the speaker's face and brief biography, without anything emerging as significant. Dr Emanuel Valeriani, a historian at the University of Luytens, would be addressing the conference during the morning's session. Though elderly, his saturnine good looks were still intriguing, not that women of my office are expected to notice such things.

Valeriani's subject was second-millennium Earth history, which accounts for why I had not come across his work previously. Xenotheology was barely even in its infancy during this period, with very few of humanity's occasional encounters with other species being informed by religious considerations on either side. It was presumably a fertile period for vampires, however, as it was on the topic I Am Legend: The Vampire in History, a *Subjective View* that Valeriani would be delivering his keynote address.

'I don't see...' I began, becoming distracted once again by Valeriani's burning black eyes. Even in hologram, they seemed to flare with ancient passion. I suddenly perceived what Finlay's difficulty might be. '"I am legend"? "A subjective view"? Oh dear.'

Coldly, Fr Finlay said, 'I hope you see my objection now, Imogen.'

'You can't seriously mean...' I began.

'Yeah,' Fr Duke agreed calmly, 'our guest of honour came out as a centuries-old vampire.'

FCU, Monday 19 June

Hey Sis - update as promised.

Today's been weird. Good in parts, bit weird in others. I met a nice girl and heard a vampire give a lecture, if that gives you some idea.

Went to the conf this morning, as discussed. The inaugural session was in the Tran Memorial Auditorium, the big indoor theatre where they hold concerts and graduations and stuff. I arrived early by accident and had to spend 20 minutes hiding from Gonzo, whose keynote speaker — some prima donna historian who'd insisted on being put up in the same building so he didn't have to step outside — was now making a fuss because one of the corridors crossed a waterpath.

Gonz was flapping like a tethered vulture, tending to screech at anyone who came too close. We'd been again out on the piss (or something which tasted a lot like it) the night before, so I assume he was a tethered vulture with a hangover. It wasn't pretty.

The place soon filled up with academics and students from Murigen and wherev. Like you'd expect, most of them were groundhogs, but Gonzo'd stirred up the local talent, so there were a handful of the webfoot Profs sloshing about, plus Dr Mep'to the Ias'par agronomist dipping his roots in the workpools. There were a handful of offworld exots, too, mostly species I didn't recognise.

On the human front I saw Gonzo's supervisor, Prof Yatson, and a swirl of Profs and Drs from Bio, Stats, Philos, Hist... the usual types you get at these events, I guess. The offworld groundhogs included three awkward-looking Christian priests in black frocks. (I didn't realise at first that's what they were. I've only seen priests in the horror flims, which may not be the best sources of info. Even so one of them, a skeletal old bloke with white hair sticking out each side of his head like wings, had a familiar grim look, like he was packing a crucifix he wasn't afraid to use.)

Most of the attendees were eddying around, barking hellos at each other, squeezing hands and slapping backs and all those social-nexusing things academics are expected to enjoy, or at least join in with. I was about to dive in and start handpumping with the best of them when this girl -

(OK Mein, if you're skipping ahead this is where the girl comes in, but you've missed some really great stuff about naked guys mud-wrestling dinosaurs)

— came up to me and said, 'Please don't take this the wrong way, but — are you from around here?'

I smiled at her. 'What gives it away? The tide-marks on the trousers or the fetid odour of swamp-gas?' Which, yes, was a bit rubbish, but my brain was in formal networking mode and hadn't been prepared to flirt.

She smiled back, prettily but slightly scarily. 'Sorry. Usually at these dos the offworlders are desperately hoping no-one mistakes them for locals, and the locals are hoping everyone thinks they're offworlders. I thought I'd get my apology in first. I'm looking for Dr Ibrahimssen, who apparently is local, so I was hoping I'd find somebody who knew him. You're not him, are you? I'm sorry, I'm Elanore Summerfield. Ellie. Am I talking too much?'

She was, but it had given me plenty of time to look at her. She's a — what's the non-demeaning term these days? Hottie? Honey? Babe? I can never remember. We don't get many of those round these parts. (I mean since you left, Sis, obviously.) She's shortish, plumpish (but ooh, in such a good way), honey-blond, rosy-cheeked, with ample bosomage. Her eyes are a really vivid green, reminding me of — well, duckweed actually, but again somehow in a good way. She smells like the orange-blossoms in Ravensfoot Dryland Park. As you can perhaps tell, I'm a bit smitten.

She doesn't look completely human, oddly enough — she's kind of furry, and the teeth in that pretty smile were shock sharp. I guessed partial alien ancestry, though I'm never sure how that kind of thing works. I mean, we've both met a few groundhog-webfoot couples, but have you *ever* seen a hybrid pup-baby?

Anyway. 'I'm not Gonzalo Ibrahimssen,' I said, tut I know him. I can point him out to you, but if I get too close he'll rope me into handing out name-badges or translating the proceedings into Cahlian or something. I'm Lloyd, Lloyd Doihara.'

'Please to meet you, Lloyd,' she said, taking my hand and giving it a firm shake.

She looked young — I'd've put her down as a first-year undergrad — but she had a lot of poise. Even the too-much-nervous-talking could have been deliberate, to put me at my ease. She said, 'I'm supposed to be introducing this Ibrahimssen bloke to my grandmother. She's Professor Summerfield, the archaeologist. I only mention that because some people have heard of her, and it saves time later. Or, if they're someone she's pissed off in the past and they want revenge, we can get on with running away.'

I never had — heard of her, I mean. Obviously she was one of the visiting lecturers Gonzo'd managed to reel in. Which meant that Ellie wasn't necessarily a student at all — she might just be here to babysit the old lady. I quickly revised my chat-up strategy.

'Actually, I'll take you down to meet him,' I said. 'You can't be too careful, with all these academics around. You never know when they'll decide your conversation isn't good enough and write "COULD DO BETTER" on your forehead.'

'Thanks. If I leave Granny alone too long she'll home in on the nearest bar. She can detect a sealed bottle of alcohol at a range of up to ten kilometres. It's a natural talent, but she's spent a lifetime honing it.' She sounded like she disapproved of the booze, but I was sure I could change her mind if we ended up living together in a long-term committed relationship. I'd known her nearly three minutes now, after all, and it was all going pretty well so far.

I took her to meet Gonzo, who was still clawing the ceiling but calmed down very slightly when Ellie told him they'd arrived — he'd heard nothing from Prof Summerfield for weeks, and she's due to speak tomorrow pm. We spent a while tracking the old woman down — she'd wandered off, as Ellie'd feared, and we found her outside the Groundhog Zero where Gonz and I'd been the night before, staring forlornly at the locked door.

'Time enough for that later, Granny,' said Ellie kindly enough, taking her by the arm. 'We've got a conference to go to, remember?'

The old lady shook her off, then stared at me. 'Who the hell are you?' She looked entirely human, so I ticked the mental box next to my guess about Ellie's ancestry. Either the Prof or some other relative of Ellie's had been fooling around with a carnivore species.

Ellie shot me an embarrassed look, and I tried to reassure them both with one smile. 'I'm Lloyd,' I told Prof Summerfield, talking as clearly as I could in case she had hearing diffs. 'I'm a friend of Dr Ibrahimssen's.'

'Who?' she snapped. 'You don't need to shout, you know, I'm not deaf. Bloody hell, that's such a cliché. When did I turn into a mad old woman? I'm sure I didn't use to be like this.'

I'm rubbish at gauging people's ages when they get past the half-century mark, but even if you disregard possible anti-ageing fixes the Prof looks — what, 80? 90? Pretty old, anyway. Once, and I'm talking a long time ago, she must have been nearly as good-looking as her granddaughter — she's got good cheekbones underneath the wrinkles, and her eyes looked fierce and intelligent despite the bemused frown. Her hair's white, cut at collar-length, and she was wearing giant asymmetric earrings which made her head hang slightly lopsided. Otherwise — and though she's very thin — she still stands perfectly straight, about my height.

Like most of the guests back in the auditorium, she was wearing academic dress. The black gown was too big for her, which with the skinniness and wrinkles made her look more than a tad vampiric herself.

Ellie tried to smile at me. 'I'm sorry, she's not usually this bad. The travel takes a lot out of her. She just needs a bit of a sit down, don't you Granny?'

'Don't patronise me,' the old woman snapped. 'All I need is a drink. There's no problem in the world that can't be solved with vodka. I'm sorry — Boyd, was it? — I'm in a foul mood today for some reason. Not helped by my granddaughter's attempts to keep me teetotal. I'm Bernice Summerfield — call me Benny — and this is my granddaughter Eloise. I mean Elaine.'

Her granddaughter groaned. 'It's Elanore, Granny.'

Between us, Ellie and I managed to steer Bernice back up to the auditorium, where we introduced her to Gonzo with seconds to spare. Luckily he'd saved seats for the guest speakers, so while he introduced Prof Yatson's welcoming spiel we got the old lady ensconced in the front row.

I was going to sneak up to the back and watch from there, but Ellie insisted I sat at the front with the two of them, which was fine by me — I'd happily swap the chance of a quick getaway for opps to spend more time in her company.

Yatson's opening speech was standard, totally predictable — could've been assembled phrase-by-phrase by the Uni's computers even with their Ms offline, and probably was. If I had to make a great big get-together to talk about vampires sound boring, I'd give the job to Yatson.

When he was done, we broke for drinks — tea and coffee, to Bernice's disappointment — and Ellie quizzed me on my life here at FCU while various grandees attempted coherent conversations with her grandma.

You won't credit this, Sis, but unless she was being very polite Ellie was actually interested in the quantum-channelling work I'm doing with Prof Stassy. I wouldn't expect anyone to understand the physics, obv, but she was very quick to grasp some of the implications, which is more than I can say for most of my friends, or — and of course I mean this in the nicest possible way — the spectacularly ignorant bumpkins I call family.

Am I boring you about this girl and her charms yet? I'll hurry things along, shall I?

So, after the chatting we went back to our seats for the first proper lecture — the upstorey guest historian who'd been giving Gonzo so much trouble, an old guy called Valeriani from one of the systems away near Earth.

And this is when things got weird, because it turns out Dr Valeriani is — claims to be — a genuine bloodsucky-fiendish creature-of-the-night no-garlic-please-we're-vampires vampire. After who knows how many lifetimes posing as a human, or poss a sequence of related humans, he apparently feels it's time to come out of the coffin.

The audience's reaction to this was pretty much what you'd expect — ie, complete and utter pandemonium. Most of them knew vaguely, at least, that Gonzo'd planned this conf to establish vampirism as a real

phenomenon. I'm guessing a good half had come along intending to prove him wrong and mad and wrong in every particular. But here was this guy, who refused quite matter-of-factly to go out in the sunlight or cross running water, standing in front of them flashing his fangs. (Not that he has fangs, not that you can see anyway.) Naturally they went mental.

When time for questions came I wanted to ask him how he managed to turn into a bat, but I couldn't get a word in.

After the talk, Valeriani was pretty much mobbed by people wanting to argue with him, call him a liar, examine his teeth for evidence of fanginess or (this is true) poke him with a silver cross pendant to find out whether it burned him or not. (He said it did, and Gonzo had the student in question escorted firmly off the campus.)

Bernice still needed Ellie to keep an eye on her, and even in the old days at HiHoSoc I always prioritised pretty girls over vampires. I was fairly sure I wasn't being an unwelcome pain, so I stayed with them while everyone else tried to fight their way through the crowds to Valeriani.

It turns out our Ellie's a sceptic. 'It's ridiculous, though, isn't it? I mean, it's a hoax, surely? He's winding you all up. There are no such thing as vampires.'

She eyed her grandmother warily as she said it — as if worried that the old lady would go off on one, which she immediately did.

'You young people just have no idea, have you?' Bernice said. 'You think you know it all. You wouldn't believe a fraction of the things I've seen. I've excavated palaces the size of cities, and cities the size of planets. I've worked for men who'd change the whole of human history the way you'd change your trousers. I've fought demons, zombies and witches. I've eaten pizza with God and played cricket with Sherlock Holmes. I've died more times than you've had painful leg cramps. I've been to Hell and seen the fall of the dinosaurs and visited Oscar Wilde in prison and... vampires? Vampires? Pah!'

She was talking quite loudly now, and even distracting some attention away from Valeriani. She yelled across at him, 'Come and have a bite, then, if you think you're hard enough!', then had a nasty coughing fit and had to sit down.

'She's quite a character, your grandma,' I whispered to Ellie as she slapped the old lady's back.

'She's as mad as a suitcase of trifle,' Ellie muttered. 'She's always going on about that stuff Goddess only knows what she'll say in this talk tomorrow. Like that thing about the vodka — she says that to everyone she meets these days.'

'Old people get like that,' I said, remembering — word-for-word, as ever — Grandpa's story about meeting the Last Splasher when he was a kid. And the trousers. And the goat.

'Yeah,' she said, kind of solemn now as well as quiet. 'The truth is, Granny hasn't got a lot of time left. Each one of these jaunts of hers could

be the last, and she knows it. Dad spent years trying to get her to retire, but she wouldn't even think about it. Now he's gone, the best the family can do is take turns to look after her.'

'I can hear you, you know,' Bernice spluttered. 'I'm not deaf. Seriously, though, when did I get so old? I stayed young for so long — years and years. I suppose time caught up with me, the officious cow.'

At this point — roughly — the white-haired old priest finally managed to get through the crowd to Valeriani, started trying to exorcise him, and turned what had been a civilised hubbub into a general free-for-all. Ellie had to take Bernice back to their rooms for a lie-down, and I came back here to avoid Gonzo's screeching flappage, and decided to slip you a letter. It's been a kind of eventful morning.

I hafta say, though — Ellie's right (as well as sweet-smelling and pretty). Despite everything Gonz and I used to tell each other, there's no way Valeriani's what he says he is. Either he's as mad as poor old Grandma Summerfield, or he's a clever hoaxer playing Gonz and Yatson for a couple of ignorant yokels. Either way, this conf could end up getting awkward.

Or hilariously funny, of course — could go either way. I'll slip again later and let you know what happens, shall I?

Got to go now, Sis — it really is time to write that paper. Love to Riq, and great big buckets of the stuff to you.

Your respectful, but still better-looking, brother
Lloyd

Excerpt from the keynote address delivered to the First Interdisciplinary Conference on Vampirology by Emanuel Valeriani, D.Phil.

When it comes to the Vampire, as with so many others despised by society, we find History blindfold, led astray by her seductive sister Propaganda.

Consider this. The evidence suggests that many of humanity's most prominent figures — war leaders, statesmen, gifted artists and musicians — may have been Vampire long before their supposed deaths. How many legendary heroes are said to have returned from the dead, or to have been buried sleeping, ready to return? How many saints and others have been discovered intact in their graves after decades or centuries of interment, their bodies miraculously preserved? How many founders of religions, even, have promised to raise their followers from the dead?

One of these — whose name I am requested not to speak, out of respect for the sensibilities of those of his followers present here this morning — even exhorted his followers to drink of his blood, a ritual which they follow symbolically to this day.

Need I say more?

And yet when history describes these great men and women, no mention is made of them as Vampire. Instead, which historical figure does humanity choose to remember as a bloodthirsty, brutal undead monster? Why, none other than Vlad III of Wallachia, known to history as Vlad the Impaler — but far more widely, thanks to cinema and fiction, as Count Dracula. A man — and in his case, at least, there is no reason to believe him anything other than a man — whose sadism was responsible for the agonising deaths of tens of thousands, not only of his enemies the Ottoman Turks, but of his own peasantry.

A violent war criminal, bestial, inhuman, exulting in suffering — him, oh yes, him we may safely call Vampire.

It is because of this, the greatest of all blood libels, which has been used to castigate the Vampire for far too long — many centuries too long — that

I stand before you today, my friends and colleagues, and proudly declare myself one of that noble lineage.

I, Emanuel Valeriani, am proud to call myself undead, nosferatu, wampyr — all the terms with which the living have denigrated my kind, and which belong to us by right. I promise you that others of my heritage — and there are more of us than you imagine — will follow me.

Such a movement will revolutionise the study of history in many ways — not least through bringing forth eye-witnesses who know through living memory those events which historians can only reconstruct. Let us consider the history of Earth alone...

From the journal of Imogen Tantry

Monday 1g June, continued:

As Fr Duke had supposed, I was able (albeit after lengthy debate) to persuade Fr Finlay to remain for the time being at the conference, subject to certain assurances which he instructed me to obtain from the convenor, Dr Ibrahimssen.

I am frankly surprised that such a feat of argument was even possible, let alone that I was personally capable of it. I am gratified to realise that Antonio Finlay must respect me more than I had previously imagined.

In any case, I was shortly afterwards at Dr Ibrahimssen's quarters, rousing him from what must have been a heavy sleep. Since his room was bright with Fea's magnesium rays, I supposed him to be a native of Murigen. He is younger than I expected, probably younger than I am.

He stared in confusion at my vestments. He himself was wearing rumpled pyjamas and a dressing-gown. His hair stood up at various alarming angles. He said, 'You must be one of the delegates from Earth. Dr Tantra?'

Setting him right at once, I proceeded briskly to acquaint him with Fr Finlay's concerns. These are, in short, that Finlay refuses to lend the vampire Valeriani the support of our respective academic credibilities, and that he furthermore fears for the safety of our party if we continue to remain in the vicinity of one whom he believes to be an enemy of God and the Church.

Naturally, in presenting these as the concerns of our delegation as a whole, I was obliged to be diplomatic.

I suggested that, for understandable reasons, it would be embarrassing to the Church for a priest to share a platform with a vampire. I expressed the hope that Dr Valeriani might be prevailed upon to take a restrained view of the Church's role in the history of his kind. ('Kind' sounds pejorative, but I am unsure of the exact terminology. I do know that 'species' is incorrect, however.) I added that I was confident (but would nonetheless

appreciate the personal assurance which I was sure Dr Ibrahimssen was about to give me) that the University had taken infallible steps to safeguard all its attendees.

Ibrahimssen appeared dazed. He nodded doubtfully and said, 'I guess you'd better talk to Valeriani yourself. I'll take you over.'

This had not been what I had had in mind, and I admit I quailed at the prospect. However, I supposed it was sensible to eliminate the middleman, especially when the middleman was as obviously the worse for wear as Dr Ibrahimssen was.

A short while later, an approximately dressed Ibrahimssen and I were welcomed into Dr Valeriani's accommodation. A single room in the Lang Building, the broadest construction on campus and one of the tallest, it sits a few floors above the auditorium and seminar rooms where the conference is shortly to begin.

The room is considerably larger than my own accommodation, housing a suite of three chairs and two sofas, a large low table and a screenboard with bookshelves above it. The sunken area, which would be flooded were the room in use by a Lavellan, holds a bathroom module and an integrated sleeping-area.

The room nonetheless felt cramped to me, being windowless and unadorned. It smelt sterile and un-lived in, giving me the impression that it had been hurriedly converted from some other use. At least in this hermetic box Dr Valeriani would not have been troubled by the sunlight, which I guessed would be even more bothersome to him than it had been to me.

I noticed that instead of a mattress, the bed held a wide, deep tray of soil, still showing the clear impression of a human form.

The extreme peculiarity of the situation began to dawn on me. Before this morning vampires were to me a theoretical abstraction, a thought-experiment in weird theology, less real even (since I had at least interviewed members of other unsouled species) than the Lavellans. Now, in the course of a single night, both had shown themselves to me as ineluctable realities.

'Dr Valeriani, er,' Ibrahimssen said with what I was coming to recognise as his characteristic hesitancy. 'This is Dr Imogen Tantry, from St Francis Xavier University on Earth.' Our academic titles naturally mean more to the majority of our fellow delegates than our clerical ones. 'She wanted to, um, have a word with you.'

'Dr Tantry. Charmed,' Valeriani said, extending his hand. Unwilling at this early stage to give offence, I met it with my own. To my surprise he raised it to his lips, in a gesture which cannot have been in fashion for many centuries. Whatever deleterious effects holy relics and other sacred objects may have upon vampires, I can report that kissing a priest caused him no visible discomfort.

If Emanuel Valeriani had been sleeping in his box of earth, his immaculate

figure showed not a hint of it. He wore, with the ironic condescension of a leading actor in a cameo role, the tweed suit which in historic times marked out members of the landed gentry, and which has since become the uniform of a certain type of academic.

In person he is even more imposing than his hologram. A very tall man, unbowed by the age which has turned his beard and cropped hair white, I would judge him (were he human and alive) a strong, hale septuagenarian. His eyes, as compelling in reality as in his picture, are hooded like a hawk's, shadowed beneath, surmounted by eyebrows which retain their youthful black. One's gaze is continually drawn to them.

When he speaks, his teeth gleam white. His voice is made of deep bass notes like a French horn, beautifully modulated.

It is, however, unusually difficult to concentrate on precisely what it is he says. At first I simply had a sense of being wonderfully reassured, of how absurd it had been to imagine that this charmingly urbane, darkly handsome old man could have posed any kind of a threat.

Surreptitiously I gripped the rosary in my pocket, and forced myself to listen actively. 'I once had the pleasure of meeting Pope Felix VIII,' Valeriani was telling me, 'at a presidential reception, when I was last on Earth. He was before your time, of course — a great statesman, though. I believe he realised something of my... background, but he was far too diplomatic to make an issue of it. It won't be an issue for you, Dr Tantry, I trust?'

I was opening my mouth to promise him that, naturally, none of our party would dream of causing difficulties for him purely because of his dubious mortal state, when I remembered Fr Finlay's once-expressed opinions concerning the late Pope Felix and his 'diplomatic' approach to the secular world. I realised abruptly how flimsy my favourable impressions of Valeriani would sound were I to report them back to Finlay as earnest of the vampire's goodwill.

Besides, I was suddenly not altogether certain that I was not being subtly influenced.

Gripping my rosary tight, I said, 'We're worried, to be honest, Dr Valeriani, that you might take advantage of the Church's presence at the conference to embarrass us. You might engineer a situation which would imply our approval of your... lifestyle. Either that or you might, er...'

Valeriani smiled indulgently. 'Slaughter everybody here and gorge myself on their blood?'

I swallowed. Ibrahimssen had left us alone together, I realised. He must have hurried off while Valeriani had been beguiling me. He has, after all, a conference to organise, and whatever his theoretical understanding of the situation I doubt if he quite realises that any of his attendees are capable of murder.

'Well, yes,' I answered. 'You are a vampire, aren't you? Surely it's a reasonable concern?'

I felt entirely lucid; certainly lucid enough to realise that I had achieved

this state too late to save myself if Valeriani was indeed intending pasticide. Grasping the rosary I offered up a silent prayer of thanks for my deliverance from the vampire's powers of fascination, with the rider that leaving Valeriani's rooms alive would come as a welcome sequel.

'My dear Dr Tantry,' Valeriani boomed, 'I am indeed a vampire. I intend that my speech later this morning shall both affirm and profess the fact. My feelings about your Church are, I admit, mixed. I may abhor your God and all He stands for, but I have to admire the selfless dedication of yourself and your fellow priests. Whether your calling is to relieve privation on oppressed colony worlds, or to argue intellectual niceties at academic junkets such as this one.'

The jibe, like so many others I have heard over the past few years, served further to concentrate my mind. A man (or even, I supposed, a monster) who had recourse to such petty taunts could hardly be the formidable enemy for whom Fr Finlay had taken him.

I said, 'So presumably you won't be interested in boosting your credibility by associating yourself with us?'

He roared with laughter. 'My dear girl,' he said, 'if I were to associate myself with you, I fear that the effect would hardly be as you describe. As for the other matter... I believe the vulgar expression is, "Don't shit where you eat." In this case, I can promise you that I will not be slaking my unnatural thirsts upon our fellow guests. If I did so, it would be no more in the interests of my professional career than if I were to attempt a photo-opportunity shaking hands with your esteemed colleague Dr Finlay.'

I steeled myself to speak further. 'I'm afraid I will require more than that. I need you to promise me that you won't... slake yourself at all, while we're here on Murigen. Because, if I know you're going to be out preying on innocent people, I shall have to try to stop you. And that could become terribly inconvenient for us both.'

For a moment, those dark pits blazed with vicious anger; and then, again, Valeriani laughed.

'Dr Tantry,' he said, 'you've obviously been too busy with your devotions to take stock of your worldly surroundings. Murigen has three suns. At present their cycles are so arranged that the nights last barely quarter of an hour. That's hardly time for me to nip out into Ravensfoot and get myself a snack! What's more, this campus is riddled with the Lavellans' waterpaths. From my point of view it's practically an insoluble labyrinth.'

I felt myself flush with self-consciousness. In all my fears regarding the enhanced capabilities of vampires, it had never occurred to me to consider their handicaps.

'When I arrived,' Valeriani continued, 'my shuttle had to deposit me on the roof of this building. Now I'm effectively a prisoner within it. I trust this gives you the comfort you require?'

Muttering that it did and I was sorry to have asked, I left.

Now, back in my rooms as I prepare for the conference's imminent

opening, I wonder whether I was not manipulated after all. It is clear that Valeriani understands people all too well. If he is (as his reference to Pope Felix was obviously intended to suggest) more than a hundred years old, then he has had ample time to study us. It may be that, personal charisma having failed him as a tool, he has resorted to simple social embarrassment.

It occurs to me now that Valeriani could, without ever leaving the Lang Building, arrange for visits from the providers of any number of services, reputable or otherwise, based in Ravensfoot, like a spider telephoning out for a delivery of flies.

Nonetheless, the conversation as I reported it to Fr Finlay was sufficient to reassure him, for the moment. We are to stay.

Afternoon:

Proceedings began this morning. I am mortified to report that Dr Valeriani's keynote address had scarcely finished echoing around the auditorium before Fr Finlay created an embarrassing scene.

Admittedly much of what Valeriani said was deliberately provocative. Nonetheless, Finlay's failure to observe appropriate standards of academic decorum have created a most unfortunate impression amongst our fellow delegates. I fear that this conference will not end up raising the Church's profile among academics in quite the way that we hoped.

Fr Duke and I were obliged, at the request of University security, to escort Finlay back to his rooms. On the way we passed a young woman apparently performing the same duty for her elderly tutor.

'Oh look, it's the fearless vampire killers!' the old woman called as we passed her. 'What did you think you were doing back there? You should leave the slaying to the professionals. Those things'll have your blood out as soon as look at you.'

I realised that it was Prof. Summerfield, much older now than when the hologram on the conference pad had been taken. 'Come on, Granny,' said the younger woman, practically frogmarching her away.

'You can't exorcise them, either,' I heard her mutter as they went. 'A priest should bloody know that.'

Fr Duke has grave doubts now as to whether any of us will be permitted to deliver our papers, and I can only share his concerns. Fr Finlay's appearance is scheduled for tomorrow morning. The only way in which I can imagine it being allowed to go forward is if Dr Ibrahimssen fails to find a replacement. I am certain that he is exerting all his competence in order to identify one.

Excerpt from 'By Cain out of Lilith: The Spiritual Ontology of the Undead', delivered to the First Interdisciplinary Conference on Vampirology by the Revd Antonio Finlay Ph.D.

In human culture, treatments of the vampire theme almost invariably assume a Christian worldview. In prose and drama, cinema and software, popular depictions of the undead are accompanied by conjecture as to their spiritual status. These elicit unexpected reserves of religious interest from otherwise quite secular authors — rarely matched, sadly, by their level of expertise.

Vampires are given origin myths invoking villains from the Bible or Christian legend: Cain, Lilith, Judas Iscariot, the Wandering Jew. The undead are seen cowering in fear from the sight of cross or Bible, and scarred by such substances as holy water or the communion host.

Authors of the materialist or relativist persuasion attempt to circumvent these implied Christian assumptions. The former seek to rationalise tradition by suggesting that vampires themselves are superstitious, and carry their beliefs and fears beyond life, with purely psychological results. This scarcely accounts for such motifs surviving into such a secular age as our own.

Meanwhile the relativists suggest that it is faith itself, and not its object, which the creatures abhor. Any symbol from a Star of David to a swastika would repel them, provided faith itself is strong. This fails to address the question of why moral conviction, of all possible brain-states, should be so repugnant to the undead.

I adhere to a more obvious hypothesis — that the symbols of God serve to ward off the vampire because the vampire is the enemy of God.

Ancient tradition suggests that vampires are those who in life were suicides, apostates, witches and the like. In this model, vampirism was a form of perdition for those whose wickedness was believed too extreme even for Hell.

By contrast, modern theory sees vampirism as a disease, passed on by the exchange of blood with an infected individual. Yet damnation cannot

be spread through physical contagion. The sinner always has the choice to overcome temptation and live virtuously.

And indeed, it would seem God's faithful are able to protect themselves from vampires by appealing to Him. Why then should we not believe that those who succumb to the vampire's corrupting bite do so by choice? At some level of intention, conscious or otherwise, the vampire's victims welcome their new state.

In this case, the sufferings of the vampire — the eternal half-life lived in fear of light and goodness, the insatiable bloodlust, the perennial return to a grave where no peace can be found — are self-inflicted punishments, the results of a voluntary exile from God's grace.

Such creatures deserve neither our sympathy nor our concern. Like a demon they are irredeemable, yet unlike a demon — as I myself recently had the unpleasant task of establishing — they will not succumb to Christian exorcism.

If such is the case, then our recourse must be to physical action. Vampires are hard to kill, but the techniques are well known. The creature must be pinned to the earth with a sharpened stake, its head sawn off, its mouth filled with garlic, holy water sprinkled about its resting-place...

FCU, Tuesday 20 June

Hey Mein.

Still smitten here, and getting smittener. I know — Ma would roll her eyes at me for being such a fluffhead.

Still, it's a warm and happy feeling, and I'm not repressing it just for macho points.

When last we saw our daring hero he was sitting at his screenboard, quite def just about to start work on his paper almost any minute now. That was yesterday pm, and I still need to get around. It's due tomorrow morning, so my best hope now's probably one of those campus massacres we hear so much about on the newsfeeds.

Well OK, I stuck it out for an hour or two, but it was like building a dyke out of quicksand. I just couldn't stop thinking about the Lovely Elanore. In particular which bits of her I'd most like to lick, and in what order. (Don't worry, I won't itemise. Sibling sharing has its limits and I'm aware I've merrily skipped past them already.)

I wondered how long I should leave it before I messaged her, but figured I'd be running into her again at the conf before it turned into a problem. Granny Bernice is giving her paper this afternoon, so I can bet the Fabulous Elanore'll be around then, and probably appreciating a hand with the ladysitting duties.

I bilged the work in disgust, and decided I'd better look in at the lab, what with all that wetrot about it being my job and so forth. Someone had to check whether the esteemed physicist Prof Leustassavil Construction of Channels had managed to electrocute herself in her workpool without my able help. (She hadn't, of course — must see to that shortly.)

It was Nemhain-set-Macha-rise as I stepped out, and I was so busy appreciating the pretty-coloured shadows that I damn near tripped over a big yellow cat which came to rub up against my legs. Not what I was expecting — I've actually seen a couple of cats in Ravensfoot, but never on

campus. I know us academics are notoriously eccentric, but I can't imagine who'd pay buckets to import one, then let it roam round free like that.

Still, not my prob. I stroked, it purred — standard exchange of pleasantries, I gather — then I left it yowling rudely at me from the other side of a waterpath.

Prof Stassy started in on me soon as I got to the lab, insisting I stop messing about with Gonz and his vampfest, and help her out more.

'You humans are obsessed with these absurd legends,' she said. 'Dragons, superheroes, buddhas. And now these idiotic walking corpse things with the teeth. It's ridiculous. I can't imagine how you have the nerve to call yourselves a rational species.'

Obviously vampire folklore's one of those things Lavellans never bothered with, like religions and shoes.

I said, 'There are webfoots at the conf, Prof,' but that just set her off on one of her polit rants — blah blah human cultural imperialism blah subsuming Lavellan identity blah blah. I got on with stuff and tried to ignore her.

Turns out she's got other things on her mind — she's at a crucial stage with her experiments (I can tell you this without fear of compromising our security, I know, because you've no interest in my work whatsoever), since a couple test objects she's sent through her latest quantum channels came back all but intact. A promising prerequisite for using them in any kind of interstellar transport system, I had to agree.

(You see — and I'm putting this in brackets just so you can skip it, Mein, because I truly care about your poor overtaxed brain — Stassy has this vision of setting up permanent quantum channels between star-systems — like the quantum nodes the SLIPnet uses, only larger and kind of more physical — and just swimming through them. No, I'm serious — she's talking actual channels, waterpaths flowing from one planet's surface straight onto another, with the Lavellans administering the access to it all and blah liberation blah blah yoke of human imperialism blah greater destiny blah blah blah. How she plans on stopping groundhog physicists like me from setting up our own quantum gateways I've no clue, but the idea seems to keep her happy.)

I promised I'd be in again tomorrow — which would be today, so that's a big 'oops' on that one so far — to help out with more experimenting. Then I dripped off quickly while she was doing something at the bottom of her pond. I hoped I'd see the cat again — I thought I'd spotted it through the lab window while the Prof was fossificating — but no sign.

I tried calling the Divine Elanore, but no reply. I left a mess asking if she fancied coming up the Erdem Observatory with me one afternoon when there's some dark, and looking at the stars. There's not a lot of cloud cover (that's right, no rain right now — see what you miss when you emigrate?) and we might be able to see the one she's from, whichever. (Yeah, I looked it up, but no info — Prof Summerfield's had a peripatetic life, and doesn't

sit still more than a few years. The records don't give any clue where the family's based.)

OK, so the Glamorous Elanore doesn't have to say yes. In fact, I structured it the best I could so she could say no and make it sound like it's astronomy she isn't interested in. If it's a yes — well, starlight and solitude's the classic combo, isn't it? She'll know what she's signing up for. If she's into the idea, I think we can take that as a definite encouragement, don't you, Sis?

Thank you. I knew you would.

I tried again that evening to get the work to flow, but there were big mental dams in the way. And so to bar, where I'd hoped I might run into the Captivating Elanore (OK, I'm stopping now, I'm annoying myself already and they'll only get sillier now I've gone through the obvious) — but instead got cornered by a bunch of delegates who clocked me as Gonzo's little helper and wanted to talk conference, conference, conference.

Plus, obviously, vampires.

One of them — a woman called Kayjay who under other circs I might have been kind of intrigued by, though she's at the mature end of amenable — wanted to know whether bio-memetic changes in the brain caused by a theoretical pathogen she calls Haemovorax could affect quantum strata to produce anomalous observed effects like null reflections and shapeshifts. It's not a bad idea, but not one I wanted to address in combination with my beer.

I tried the other likely places, but no sign of Ellie. I guessed she had her work cut out trying to keep Bernice's biochemical state under control, ahead of her big appearance. Evench, as Fea started crawling up the sky, I called it a night and went to bed.

When I got up this am I had another go at breaching the mental dams — not a trickle. I considered salvaging Kayjay's quantum-strata idea, but too many people'd heard her telling me about it and me going, 'Oh, uh, yeah, I guess.'

So, I wandered to the conf again — and wahey for that, because otherwise I'd have missed round two of Dracula vs the Exorcist.

You remember I told you about the Earth priest, Antonio Finlay, who tried to do the bell-book-and-candle number with our nosferatu wannabe, Dr Valeriani? Well, it was Finlay's turn to give a paper this am, and he is not a vampire groupie. Gonzo's been trying to get some other dupe in to replace him (he even asked me if I'd move my talk forward, after giving me basically five minutes' notice of it in the first place, the twat), but no luck. The girl priest's been kicking up a fuss — blah giving Valeriani a platform blah silencing his opponents blah — so Gonz has had to let the thing go ahead.

Like I say, Finlay's not exactly a friend to the vampire man. Valeriani's talk yesterday was basically an Undead Pride Manifesto, and Pride according to Finlay's a sin. (He mentioned others like Lust and Sloth, but I was fantasising about Ellie and couldn't be arsed to listen.) He basically

called for us to form a mob, get hold of a job lot of blazing torches and storm Valeriani's rooms.

The undead guy's none too pleased, you can imagine. Gonz says -

- Hey, actually, Mein, I'm gonnahafta go. Ellie just messaged me in a flap, saying she's found Bernice in a bar with a crowd of empty beer glasses for company, and since she's presenting her paper in 20 mins, can I come help carry her to the auditorium?

'She'll be fine as long as she sticks to her script,' Ellie says. Touching faith in her family that girl has. I'll let you know how that ends up.

It's nice she asked, though. You could even call it a definite encouragement.

Got to go now. Be good, Sis — and don't wait up.

Love (+ to Riq)

Lloyd

Excerpt from 'Excavation of the Blood Citadel of Alukah: A Personal Account', delivered to the First Interdisciplinary Conference on Vampirology by Prof. Bernice Summerfield

There's a very old tradition about the planet Alukah, dating back at least to the prehistory of all the nearby inhabited worlds.

The story goes that when our universe was born — whatever that means — Alukah was the local throneworld of a vast palaeohistoric civilisation. The legend says that the Alukahites were giants, winged like devils and ugly as sin. The dominant life-forms on the nearby worlds are pretty varied — some of them look like sea-cucumbers, frankly — so the fact that they all agree the Alukahites were ugly is rather special in itself.

The Alukahites were, in our terms, vampires. They weren't bound to a single form, although the shapes they used were far more monstrous than bats or wolves. They could turn themselves into smoke, filling a planet's atmosphere and inducing a nuclear winter. A single one in its natural shape might fill the sky of a world, big enough to blot out its sun, yet cast no shadow on the ground below.

They had incredible hypnotic powers. They could enslave entire planetary populations, and did so regularly. To the wildest and most devious of their slaves they gave a little of their own nature — making them like themselves, though much lesser in power. Some they took back with them to Alukah as servants, some remained to garrison the locals and keep them pacified. Every thirteen local years the garrisons would round up a thirteenth of the population — the numbers seem to have been important — and ship them off to Alukah, blood for their masters.

Their masters needed a lot of blood.

Although they flew freely between the stars on their giant bat-wings, the Alukahites far preferred the darkness of a planetary shadow — that's 'night', for those of us who can still remember such outlandish concepts after a few days on Murigen. Alukah's rotational and orbital periods are identical, so it keeps one surface always facing towards its sun, and one

facing away. In an icebound desert continent at the centre of Alukah's dark side the great vampire civilisation built their headquarters in this galaxy — the Blood Citadel of Alukah.

These days, of course, nobody believes a word of it. Nobody sane, at least.

Which is why, four months ago, I led an expedition to Alukah to dig up what I hoped would be the remains of a previously-undiscovered Universal Forerunner Culture. The legends all agree that the Alukahites were destroyed in a great war with a race of celestial beings, so it was — we assumed — perfectly safe. We...

...I'm sorry, I — I'm very sorry. It isn't easy remembering some of this.

We'd borrowed a high-tech prototype of a new archaeological implement called a Jehovah Trowel. The branding could obviously do with a bit of work, but the unit itself is quite impressive. It's basically a precision application of terraforming tech — it creates finely-controlled seismic blasts designed to vibrate sand away from a given area, a microscopic layer at a time. Use it properly at a desert site and as the sand or dirt craters around you you'll see the entire dig emerging, very slowly, before your eyes. Very, very slowly.

But what a sight it was. Very little happens on Alukah, geologically speaking, but the Alukahites have been gone for a long time. The rooftops we unearthed from that freezing sand stand hundreds of metres tall: we never got as far down as the walls themselves. The battlements are like mountain ridges, encrusted with turrets like rockets, and gargoyles which could wrestle the Sphinx into submission. They're made of black marble, with decorations in black basalt and black granite and black obsidian and — well, you can spot the theme.

It loomed above us in the crater like a gigantic stag beetle watching a few of... well, whatever stag beetles eat, scurrying about beneath it. It was... evil.

Just evil.

I know that's not a very professional assessment, coming from an archaeologist, and I'm sorry, but...

The things we saw inside. The murals. The skeletons. Rooms full of fossil beings, dead a billion years and desiccated by the desert air, still bearing the marks of how they died. The victims of the Alukahites.

Dust everywhere. Dust, silence and the sound of bones in the darkness...

They're evil. The Alukahites are evil, and evil never dies. There's evil in all of us still, even today. I've seen it — even in the most innocent of children there's a predator, howling to be released. They're still here, all around us and inside us. They're still *here*...

Don't look at me like that! I've seen them! Why won't you won't listen to me? Are you — you can't all be on their side, can you? Oh god, you are! You're all predators...

I'm still there, aren't I? I never got away from Alukah! You're playing with me, wearing me down so you can feed...

No! No! Let go of me! **Get your filthy** claws away**from me — !**

From the journal of Imogen Tantry

Tuesday 20 June:

Since Fr Finlay's frankly provocative appearance this morning, all three of us have been avoiding Dr Valeriani. Rumours among our fellow conference-goers suggest that he is in the process of lodging a formal complaint with the University authorities.

Finlay himself is skulking in his room, refusing to open the door to Fr Duke, myself or anybody else. For the past hour he has refused even to speak to us. Privately, having made a great deal of fuss to ensure our party's safety at this conference, I am deeply embarrassed that one of our number has seen fit to threaten a fellow attendee, in terms which scarcely even qualify as veiled. Though I am perhaps overly inclined to caution, I cannot help feeling also that provoking a vampire might be considered a rash move. For Finlay's own sake, I hope that the tales of such creatures requiring an invitation in order to cross a threshold are correct.

(To be honest, I doubt this. A creature displaying all the weaknesses traditionally ascribed to vampires would be so vulnerable as to have difficulty surviving for weeks, let alone centuries. If, God forbid, the Fathers and I come into direct conflict with Valeriani, our survival will presumably lie in discerning which elements of the legend are fiction and which reality.)

In public, of course, I shall toe the party line. Fortunately for us (though certainly not for the poor woman herself), Prof. Summerfield has diverted some attention away from us, supplanting Finlay as the latest topic of campus gossip. Whilst presenting her paper this afternoon, the professor forgot herself altogether and began raving about monstrous horrors from the dawn of time. Her granddaughter, Miss Elanore Summerfield, was forced to restrain her before she harmed herself. I fear that the professor is delusional, very likely suffering from one form or another of senile dementia.

Her lecture was of necessity cut short and, just as yesterday, Miss Summerfield was forced to take her grandmother back to her room. I offered my assistance, but the young woman and a scruffily handsome postgraduate student in a trenchcoat (her current beau, I assume) insisted that they were capable of handling things.

I admire Miss Summerfield's dedication to her grandmother, rare as it is in such a young woman. (Heavens, how pompous I've become since becoming a priest. Miss Summerfield can't be as much as ten years younger than I am.) However, I can only blame their family for allowing the professor to continue to embarrass herself in this way.

Dr Ibrahimssen is talking of allocating her another time-slot later in the week (I rather fear that he has mine or Fr Duke's in mind), but I cannot imagine that she will be capable of taking it. The poor woman should have gone to her deserved retirement long ago.

I think I shall try talking to Fr Finlay again. Surely he must allow one or other of us in to see him eventually.

Later:

Fr Finlay has disappeared. I am afraid that I should have anticipated this.

As the evening has progressed, the silence from his room has remained absolute. As Fr Duke had cause to learn aboard the *Serene Diameter*, Finlay does not as a rule spend much of his time asleep.

Eventually, fearing for Fr Finlay's safety, I located my amiable Lavellan housekeeper and persuaded her to lend me a spare key. The room is empty.

It is both puzzling and ominous. Fr Finlay's door was locked, his window open. Although the latter is large, the room is on the fifth floor, with a sheer drop to the pavement below. A ledge, surely too narrow for anyone other than a gymnast to traverse, leads away in both directions.

Our first assumption, horrifying but understandable under the circumstances, appears to be unsupported. There is no sign of impact beneath the window, and the University's medical staff have no knowledge of an accident.

I am at present waiting in Finlay's rooms for any sign of his return. Fr Duke is most concerned for our colleague, naturally, but he feels it important to prepare his own paper for tomorrow's proceedings (assuming Dr Ibrahimssen's continued co-operation, of course), to counteract the effect of Finlay's upon the attendees' perceptions. I have remained here while he works, to await Finlay's potential return.

As yet Duke has not encountered Dr Valeriani personally. I believe that to him, as to Ibrahimssen and most of our fellow delegates, the historian's undead condition remains a matter of abstract curiosity.

Although I pray otherwise, I fear that it may become a real, indeed pressing, concern to many of us uncomfortably soon. When Valeriani

and I spoke yesterday morning I missed the implication, but in describing his arrival on campus by shuttle he effectively admitted to having crossed running water whilst airborne.

(Indeed, it is ludicrous to imagine that this would not be the case. Would a vampire aboard a speeding aircraft bail out rather than cross the path of a river? Whatever compulsion, psychological or otherwise, informs Valeriani's geophyrophobia, it must take effect only at ground level.)

I wonder, do the stories of vampires metamorphosing into flying creatures fall under fiction or reality? Does the window of a room qualify as a threshold?

Wednesday 21 June:

Dear God protect us all.

The worst has happened. Fr Finlay has been taken from us, and much else besides.

I must try to record as much as I am able of what has transpired during this awful night. Fr Duke is here, and we have agreed to sleep in shifts, in the hope that we will avoid poor Finlay's fate.

As yesterday evening progressed, my concern for Finlay, and my suspicions concerning Dr Valeriani, eventually drew me (unless indeed it was a different, more sinister compulsion) to the vampire's rooms in the Lang Building. For what protection it may have offered, I wore a prominent crucifix which I had found in Finlay's rooms. Absurd though it sounds, I also bought a packet of medicinal garlic tablets from the campus pharmacy, of which I hurriedly swallowed a handful.

Seized outside the historian's door by a last-minute inspiration, I called up the words of the baptismal rite on my handpad, and (again feeling ridiculous) said the blessing over a half-empty bottle of mineral water which I happened to have in the pocket of my cassock.

Thus fortified, I knocked on Valeriani's door.

'Dr Tantry,' he purred as he threw the door wide to admit me. 'How good of you to come and see me. A diplomatic visit, I assume?' Seeing me hesitate before entering, as if I had been the vampire, he added, 'Do come in, I won't bite.'

I understood that he had been sleeping, or whatever passes for sleep among his kind. Although his person was otherwise as immaculate as ever, his silk dressing-gown was spattered with soil. Tiny cleaning-robots like dung-beetles were balling up earth, which stretched in a trail between the door and his bed.

He offered me a drink which, with some reluctance, I declined. I needed to retain my intellectual acuteness; nor, of course, could I be confident that he would not drug or poison me.

I had some thought of engaging him in desultory conversation, examining the room the while for any place where Finlay, alive or dead,

might be concealed. However, as I had found before, the mere fact of conversing with Valeriani became so absorbing that I had little attention to spare even for the words I was speaking, let alone for any parallel activity.

'My view,' I found myself saying some time later, 'is that, although God could certainly create a class of creatures incapable of experiencing salvation, the just and loving God in whom the Church believes would not.'

Aware of myself again, I realised that we were discussing, of all things, my doctoral research. I was reciting the pre-prepared response which I suspect most academics keep in store for social occasions, where questions on such topics commonly arise.

This time there had been nothing in my train of thought to pull me out of my mesmerised state. I wondered whether the garlic had just begun to enter my bloodstream.

I glanced around the room, continuing: 'It should be a matter of faith for us that the Lavellans and the other so-called "unsouled" are as deserving of God's grace as we ourselves, though the form in which they encounter it may be unknowable to us.'

'To me especially, perhaps.' He seemed amused by this.

Places where an inert human form might be kept were distressingly abundant: the wardrobe, the bathroom module, a cupboard, the spaces under the desk or the bed... even the soil in the mattress-tray, though shallow, could conceal a corpse from a cursory glance. Nor had I yet taken into account loose floor or ceiling panels and the like.

I realised that my chances of checking all of these spaces without arousing Valeriani's suspicions were nonexistent. This left the direct approach. 'Dr Valeriani,' I said with deliberate rudeness, 'what have you done with Fr Finlay?'

He raised an eyebrow. 'Nothing, I assure you. Finlay and I have our differences, as you know, but —'

'As we've established,' I said, interrupting him, 'you are a vampire.' I was certainly free of his influence for the moment, however I had managed it. 'To suggest that this makes you capable of violent murder isn't an accusation, it's a defining of terms. Now where, please, is Antonio Finlay?'

He smiled coldly. 'I'm afraid you don't understand us at all. I'm a civilised man, and however much I disagree with my fellow academics I'm not in the habit of bumping them off unless I'm forced to.'

'Yet you feed on human blood,' I said.

Valeriani waved this away. 'Blood can be taken without killing. If you insist on prying into my feeding arrangements, the stuff I drink is ethically sourced. My needs are fulfilled more painlessly than those of most meat-eaters. Are you a vegetarian, incidentally, Dr Tantry?'

Ignoring the jibe, I was nonetheless puzzled. 'So you don't kill in order to drink?'

'On Luytens Eta I have arrangements with a roster of consensual donors, friends and colleagues all.' I noted that he had not answered my question. 'When I travel, I rely on medically synthesised haemoglobin. My storage unit's in the cupboard,' he added sardonically, 'if you're hoping for an excuse to look there.'

'You won't mind, then, if I search the room?' I asked, with more bravado than my circumstances justified.

He waved a hand. 'Please, be my guest. You won't mind if I dress?'

If Valeriani was hoping to shock me by changing in front of me, he had misjudged his priest. I studiously ignored him as I searched the hiding-places I had previously noted. There was indeed a refrigerator unit in the cupboard, containing a score of litre bags full of dark red fluid. The other places were empty, or contained the innocent items which one would have expected.

I took a curt leave of Valeriani. As I left the building it was night, the bite-sized blackness between Macha's setting and Fea's rising. This surprised and perturbed me. I shall have to pay closer attention to the movements of Murigen's suns.

Despite the late hour and the coincidental darkness, the campus was far from deserted, with cliques and solitary students bustling between bars. I hurried away from the Lang Building towards my own accommodation.

As I passed a dark alley between two tapering faculty buildings, I heard a whisper from the shadows: 'Imogen...'

Recognising the voice, I stopped. 'Father Finlay? Father, is that you?'

'Imogen,' the voice repeated: quiet, calm, strangely insinuating, quite unlike Fr Finlay's usual brusque use of my Christian name.

'Father, we've been so worried!' I said, hurrying to meet him. 'What happened to you? Are you all right?'

As Finlay stepped out of the shadows he seemed to glide.

His face was pale. His eyes were tinged with the light of crimson Macha, currently shining on the other side of Murigen's globe. White teeth gleamed in the corners of his predatory smile.

Excerpt from 'Interspecies Pathology of the Haemovorax Pathogen', delivered to the First Interdisciplinary Conference on Vampirology by K.J. Nemeth, Ph.D.

We can say with certainty that the pathogen responsible for vampirism, never positively isolated but known provisionally to cryptoepidemiology as Haemovorax, is one of very few which crosses boundaries not only of species, phylum and kingdom but even of biosphere, infecting individuals whose evolutionary origins lie in many different stellar systems.

Its only ostensible preference is for sentient hosts, although this too is inconclusive: such exceptions as are on record have proved impossible to reproduce in the laboratory. This perhaps suggests that the infective agent has a memetic as well as a physical component, although Kostakis certainly goes too far in suggesting that the pathogen is exclusively memetic and generates its physical effects through an exotic combination of psychosomatics and psychokinesis.

This wide-spectrum infectiousness does, however, support Shapiro's contention that Haemovorax may be of artificial origin, although the extreme antiquity of the earliest recorded outbreaks suggest that, if it is a biological weapon, it was created by one of the first technological cultures to evolve in our universe. At an interdisciplinary symposium, however, such colourful speculations are perhaps left to our more imaginative archaeological colleagues.

In this lecture I will draw on a range of epidemiological studies describing Haemovorax analogues in multiple sentient species, and the variations in the pathology across their differing biologies. In most of these cases transmission across species was demonstrated, with a subject of one species, usually human, successfully infecting a member of another species with the analogous condition.

In general, we will see that the primary symptoms remain as consistent across species as biology will allow. Individuals with circulatory systems analogous to the mammalian will, under the influence of Haemovorax, consume the circulatory fluids of others, and die if their primary circulating

organ is catastrophically ruptured. Others may subsist on non-circulatory bodily solvents, respiratory gases or even electrical impulses, and will be vulnerable to the severe disruption of an associated bodily structure. Those with more exotic biologies exhibit more extreme permutations.

The apparently incidental symptoms of vampirism exhibit far greater routine variation. Indeed, this has historically been the case even among disparate human communities, suggesting either that the pathogen is subject to extensive mutation or that the memetic element can be culturally inflected. In the case of cross-species transmission, such variations may be ascribed to *Haemovox* spontaneously adapting itself to new conditions. In some cases, these adaptations appear almost intelligent.

In free-floating gas-dwelling species, for example, the restorative effects which terrestrial vampires habitually derive from their native soil will be transferred to the atmosphere of their home region. In species which are naturally nocturnal, vampiric individuals will become diurnal, preying on their sleeping fellows during the day when the light is too dazzling for them to be easily seen, and exhibiting a profound nyctophobia. In species already capable of extensive cellular regeneration, the vampire's accelerated healing becomes even more pronounced...

Lloyd Doihara to Meinir Doihara

FCU, *Wednesday 21 June*

Mein.

Oh shit, Sis, I wish you were here.

Look, you're going to have to come back to Murigen. I can't leave campus, not now, but the stuff that's been happening here... it could spread. Mum and Ma may not be safe, even in Saltmire. You have to come and get them offplanet if you can.

I'm not joking, sister. Bring Riq with you, grab the Ms and take them back with you to Cheiral. Tell them it's a surprise holiday or something. Take the bloody water buffalo if you have to.

I'll send more later.

Love you.

Lloyd

From the journal of Imogen Tantry

Wednesday 21 June, continued:

I was shocked by the sight of Fr Finlay so changed. I felt my heart racing and my lungs contracting, threatening to suffocate me. It was quite clear what had happened: stunned though I was, it was obvious at once to me that I was facing my second vampire.

He saw at once that I understood, and inclined his head. His movements had become slower and more considered, yet almost reptilian in character. He wore layman's clothes, with no cross or other Christian symbol visible. A muted scent surrounded him, as of distant decay. I wondered whether, if I touched him, I would find his skin cold.

His presence unnerved me in a way which Valeriani's, so far at least, had not. His hands slithered behind his back to clasp one another.

'Father...' I was foundering for want of words, but I needed to understand. I asked, 'How much are you changed?' I needed to know to what extent the creature before me was the remnant of Antonio Finlay, and how much a newborn monster of Emanuel Valeriani's spawning.

'Oh, utterly.' He smiled again. Finlay had never smiled during the time that I had known him. I had no way to know whether his grin would always have reminded me of a skull's. 'Imogen, I am changed beyond measure. I am free of all fear.'

When the vampire came for him, he told me, he was terrified. He held, as he had always been taught to hold, to his faith for his protection. He prayed to God; he clutched his crucifix; he held his Bible before him as a barrier. In his body he cowered and quailed, but in his faith he knew that he was strong.

'Not strong enough,' I said softly. I too was scared out of my wits. As yet I could not tell whether I was sympathising with a friend in a degraded condition, or protecting myself from an assassin who had taken his place.

'Oh, I tried,' he said. 'I held fast to my faith, Imogen. I held it up as a

protection against my fear, just as that Bible was my protection against my attacker.' He frowned. 'And then I remembered why it was that I believed.'

The past tense reinforced my fears. 'Why?' I asked. In the pocket of my cassock my fingers probed for my rosary.

Antonio Finlay admitted to me then that he had come to religion because he was afraid. As a boy, he was afraid of the dark, of monsters, of his mother's stories of Hell. As a young man, he feared other men, the cruelties which they committed and the cruel regimes which they upheld. And as he advanced into age, he became afraid of illness, of decrepitude and of death. His faith had been his refuge from that fear, yet it was founded in nothing more concrete than the fear itself.

'My faith rose out of fear,' he concluded. 'Fear had created it, and fear could destroy it utterly.' He gazed at me with a strange compassion. 'When I needed it most, Imogen, when my life depended wholly on my faith, it crumbled before my fear, like mummified skin in sunlight.'

He did not say that God deserted him, because he did not believe that God had ever been truly there. Antonio Finlay's God was the parent who turns on the light, the benign authority who arrests the wrongdoer and the doctor who staves off death, projected onto the canvas of the infinite. He believed in Him because he feared the absence of Him.

'Now,' he said, 'I have embraced that absence. I faced my fear, and now, for the first time I can remember, I am truly not afraid. And so yes, Imogen, I am changed beyond measure, changed utterly.'

I had been crying, but now I made my voice firm. Not only my life, but Finlay's soul, might rest upon what I said next. 'And what will you do now, Antonio?' I asked. I could not call him 'Father' now, but his surname felt too cold for what had been our friendship. Will you return to the hope you once had, and search again for what you believed you'd already found? Or will you give in to your despair, and become as lost as Valeriani?' In my pocket with my rosary, my fingers worked.

His smile became a smirk. 'I have another calling now,' he said. 'A mission from my maker. I am to make disciples of all nations. I am to go forth and multiply.'

The quoting of scripture finally convinced me that there was nothing of my Finlay left.

'Starting, I suppose, with me,' I stammered.

Without seeming to move, he stood beside me. His face had elongated, suddenly and shockingly, into a snake-mask, wide-jawed and hideously fanged.

'Oh yes,' he hissed.

The suddenness and terror of it almost prevented me from carrying out my carefully prepared response, which was to fling the contents of my unscrewed bottle of holy mineral water into his face. In fact, since so much of that face was taken up now by his mouth, the best part of it went inside,

a few drops only splashing onto his lips and chin. There was a sizzling and a stench as of hot fat, followed by a drawn-out gargling scream.

I was in no position to gauge the effect of my assault. I had turned, and was racing toward the nearest of the Lavellan waterpaths, a distance of some ten metres. Behind me the scream quietened, replaced by a pained whimper which approached my back with appalling speed. Without hesitation, and looking (I am certain) ridiculously undignified, I jumped into the tepid water and began struggling across, borne down by the increasing weight of my swiftly soaking cassock.

I reached the far side of the watercourse, clutched to the far pavement for support, and turned again to look behind me. The creature which had once been Finlay knelt at the water's edge. His face had returned to the human, disfigured now by livid red burns.

He glared at me with a malevolence in which I recognised nothing of my old tutor.

'Water,' he rasped. His voice was hoarse and strained. 'All this new strength of mine, confounded by a little water. How humbling.' He reached a hand out to the flowing channel, then whipped it back as if burned.

'Well,' he said. 'We'll have to see what we can do about that.' He stood, and slid back into the shadow from which he had come.

To my right, the bright rays of rising Nemhain began to tint the buildings cobalt-blue.

Midday:

I have slept, and slept too long.

My body was in shock, of course, but I should not have allowed myself to succumb to it.

Fr Duke has gone (according to the note which he has left for me) into Ravensfoot, to seek help from the temporal authorities. I can only trust that he will be safe. His faith is far stronger than mine; but so, I was certain, was Finlay's. I have missed this morning's session at the conference, which is unfortunate, as additional information concerning the pathology of vampirism could now mean life or death for any of us here. Fr Duke is due to present his paper this afternoon, but I cannot imagine that this session will now take place.

I have prayed for Antonio Finlay's soul, although I have no way of knowing whether it resides still in his body or has already fled to find God's infinite mercy. The poor man, discovering at the hour of his greatest need that the rock on which he believed he had built his life was no more solid than the shifting sand.

I wonder whether, in some peculiar half-conscious way, Finlay came to warn me. There was no reason for his 'maker' to show his hand at this stage. While Valeriani might well desire to destroy a single enemy out

of revenge, it is hardly in his interests to have the fact bruited around the campus, especially while attempting to rehabilitate the reputation of the vampire kind.

I believe that Finlay, who knows me well, realised that I would understand this. Regardless of his soul's fate I suspect that, within his brain, the residue of his former principles is fighting a guerrilla war against the occupying vampire impulses.

I have introspected enough, however. I fear that I also know what Finlay meant when he spoke of overcoming the vampires' hydrophobia; and in this, he was speaking solely as a newborn monster.

If all my suppositions are correct, then there is only one person on this campus who can help us now.

Excerpt from 'The Vampire as Object-Lesson in Moral Philosophy', by the Revd Prof. Luke Duke, Ph.D. (never delivered.)

When I say 'vampire' here, I'm not talking about real beings like Dr Valeriani. I'm interested in the vampire as a theoretical construct, a thought experiment. An entity which survives beyond death, which owes no allegiance to God, which casts no shadow as it walks through the world, which gains its sustenance by draining the blood of the living.

There are times in all of our lives when we're this kind of vampire. When we feel as if our soul has died inside us. When we're indifferent at best to our creator. When we feel like the world around us barely notices our passing. When we take what we need from others, with no thought for their welfare.

It's this last element of vampires which supposedly defines them. Vampires — and let me just emphasise again I'm talking about an idea here, not any individual — are the ultimate predators.

For vampires, every biological urge — hunger, thirst, self-defence, sex, parenting — comes down to one action: the bite. The act of feeding on another. A vampire bite provides all the nourishment a vampire needs, at another's expense. It kills, hurts or at least warns off would-be attackers. It acts to propagate the vampire's kind, turning others into vampires like itself.

Vampires are the distilled essence of predation in bodily form. And as such, as our respected colleague Prof. Summerfield suggested yesterday, there's something of the vampire in all of us.

No organism exists in all the universe which doesn't feed on other organisms to live. If we're animals, we kill living things and eat them. If we're plants like Dr Mep'to, we draw our nutrients from the soil, itself the remains of the plant and animal dead. Even our first ancestors, strands of primitive genetic material writhing with the first inspiration of life, reproduced themselves by absorbing and assimilating other molecules.

We all of us exploit each other for our own selfish ends.

It's practically the definition of life.

If vampirism is an infection, then, our entire cosmos is infected. We live in a predatory universe. Far from being unnatural, vampires may be the purest, clearest expression of nature there is.

As a Catholic, of course I put this down to original sin, resulting from the Fall of Man. The serpent of the Book of Genesis is a myth, but there was some influence, some ur-predator nesting like a brooding dragon at the universe's earliest point, which tainted its development forever, setting all later life — including all of us here — along our various predatory paths.

We shouldn't despair. In the Kingdom of Heaven, we're told that the lion will lie down with the lamb. For all I know that goes for dragons and vampires too...

Lloyd Doihara to Meinir Doihara

FCU, Wednesday 21 June

Sis,

OK, so obv you'll need more than that last before dropping everything and coming running. I get. I just had to slip the urgent part as quick as poss.

Now I've done that, I'll try to tell you what's been happening, best as I can. Might be an idea to get it all down — worst happens, people should know what went on here.

So this am I was at the conf, still. That Kayjay woman I mentioned, the cryptoepidemiologist, was giving a paper — dry to listen to, but with way clever stuff about vampirism as an adaptive organism, changing its characteristics in different-species hosts.

(For inst, she says only human-origin vampires have issues with garlic — those from other species pick a local botanic equivalent and develop a horror of it. According to her, dolphin vampires can't swim past kelp. Er, that bit could have been a joke now I come to think.)

This afternoon was supposed to be one of the other priests, a Rev Prof called Duke, but -

- shit, I've just remembered I'm supposed to be giving my paper tomorrow am. I guess that's not gonna happen either, now.

Sis, I'm going swirly here. I'll try and calm down.

Right, so anyway. Gonzo was missing some key people today — a speaker for later in the week, a couple of undergrad helpers. He thought maybe the twin spectres of Finlay and Valeriani, plus Bernice's rant about ancient bat-demons (oh yeah — remind me to tell you how that went, if we ever get the chance) might've scared people away.

'Life's so unfair, Gonz,' I said to him. 'You organise a conf about vampires, you get a bunch of loonies turning up. Who could've predicted that would happen?'

Prof Yatson wasn't returning his messages, either — Gonz was worried

maybe he was washing his hands of the thing and setting him up to take the fall. (Turns out since that's really not an issue.)

Lunchtime I had plans — a little amateur astronomy with the Delectable Elanore. Actually, that sounds dirtier than I meant it to. I actually mean amateur astronomy.

That's right — in more-or-less unrelated news (and the only good thing that's happened since I told you not to wait up), El Summerfield's answer to my Erdem Observatory excursion was pretty much a yes. In fact she said she'd come if I could find a reliable carer to cope with Grandma Benny during lunchtime. I called my students, found one who owed me favour and needed cash, and promised him beer instead.

Ellie and I got Granny settled with Appalling Steve ('Why does he call you that?' she was asking him as we left. 'I'll see if I can guess, shall I?'), and eddied off to our starlight assignation. Ellie made us take what she called a scenic route, but we still made it up the tower of Erdem Ob to watch the Macha-set. It's the tallest building on campus — well, has to be — and there's this glorious view of the Uni buildings, greyish-white and craggy, cascading towards the blue-green marshland like a gigantic ice-floe in some arctic ocean.

(Turns out Ellie brings out the poet in me. Now I know the bastard's there I'm going to start charging him rent.)

As Macha finally splashed down in the puddly distance, the sky faded, bloody to black, and all the stars came out. A cold wind blew across the campus, and Ellie cuddled up against me on our bench.

We weren't the only couple up there, natch — it's a popular spot — but we had our privacy.

'See the yellow star up there?' I said, pointing with the arm that wasn't around her. 'That's Lachesis. My sister Meinir's on its second planet, Cheiral. You'd like her.' (No, I swear, I said that.) 'And over there's Lugh, Cuchulainn's sun. We're supposed to be allied with Cuchulainn — the Splashers were pals with their founders — but the plasmoes won't have anything to do with us since they struck polonium. The bright white one on the horizon's Kether, where the Yesodi come from. And back behind you there —'

Ellie, still shivering slightly, didn't turn. 'I don't want to look there,' she said. 'I'd rather look at this.' She reached her hand up and stroked my handsome yet stubbly chin.

I took this as that definite encouragement we were speaking of. I filled my nostrils with her orange-blossom scent, then kissed her.

Her lips are soft and warm, just like her fur. Those teeth of hers are fine sharp points, strangely sensual against my tongue -

- I'm sorry, I'm oversharing, aren't I Sis? I guess I'm dwelling on the happy bit, before getting on to the...

Yeah. So anyway. The darks are like 20 mins at the moment, and as I say we weren't alone, so it was all very restrained.

There was a real promise in that kiss, though. At Fea-rise I left that roof on fire.

Me, I mean, not it.

Obviously.

As the sky lit, we went down to Groundhog Zero for lunch and who-knows-what afterwards. Straight away, though, Ellie got a message from Appalling Steve, saying he'd accidentally given Bernice vodka by mistake, and now she was throwing a swirly and could Ellie come right over? We could hear the old lady in the background, shouting 'Give me another, you bastard!' and breaking things.

'That twat,' I said angrily, standing to go. 'He'd better watch out for his damn grades this term.'

Ellie pushed me back into my seat (her alien quarter's strong) and said, 'It's not his fault — Granny can be very persuasive. She'll soon be asleep, though. I'll meet you back here later.'

I tried to argue, but she said, 'Lloyd, I think I can handle my dying Granny. Give me — oh, a couple of hours, say, to get her settled.'

I opened my mouth again, but she kissed it quickly, said, 'That means you're doing fine. Leave it there for now, eh?' and went.

(Shit, I've just realised. That was the last I saw of her.)

The next couple of hours are a bit of a blur, and not for the usual reasons. I'm not sure what I did, or who I saw. I was just wandering round as Fea got higher and brighter, as the day got later, waiting for the next time I could see her. The next thing I remember actually noticing -

- and shit, Sis, this is the bit where it goes terrible -

- was two groundhog guys beating up a Lavellan, in the shadows outside the entrance to the Hemaskas Theatre.

I didn't like the look. Could be they'd a proper grievance against the webfoot guy, but it looked a lot like Lavvy-bashing to me.

I ran across, shouting, 'Oi! What d'you think you're doing?' and wondering what in the Ditch I'd do if they stopped work on the Lavellan and started on me. Then all three of them looked up, and I kind of stumbled to a stop.

The webfoot was a lad called Krevellistu, I think — Krev. Mathematisch, friend of a friend. Looking badly bruised now, and a bit dazed.

The human guys... weren't human.

Now, I know how this is going to sound. Nasty little joke, nasty little brother. Or — failing that — Lloyd's been hanging around with Gonzo Ibrahimssen too long, has accidentally been infected with his freakish twatness, and now believes in vampires.

But Sis, I swear on our mothers' lives, that's what these guys were.

Apart from being old and kind of cavernous, Emanuel Valeriani looks human. Well, that's the point — he had to tell everyone he was a vampire. With these guys, I didn't need telling. One's face was chalky-white, the other was an unhealthy blue-black, and all four of their eyes were Macha-

red. When they turned to hiss at me, their jaws opened way too wide, showing yellowing incisor fangs. Their hands were talons, like a bird's.

Also, one of them seemed to be Prof Yatson.

I said a number of short, loud, emphatic words.

Yatson hissed again and turned to grab poor terrified Krev, who'd been standing there just gaping at him. I wanted to shout 'Get to the waterpath, you twat!', but I was kind of hampered by the other vampire.

As soon as he'd finished hissing at me, this guy started to shrink. His fingers grew out and extended, and his ears got longer, but mostly he got small and black, and started kind of floating in the air. Before I'd really registered the process, he'd turned into a big black bat and was flapping at me, yipping high-pitched screeches.

I didn't get to see where the extra mass went.

I was standing directly in bright Fea-light. The thing flapped at me, straight out of the shadows. It didn't slow down, let alone spontaneously combust. I turned and ran like an absolute bastard.

I think I lost him at the first waterpath. When I was far enough away I turned back, but the pair of them'd gone — Krevellistu too.

I went straight to Groundhog Zero, to try finding Ellie. I had to get some kind of handle on this, but first I had to know she was safe.

She wasn't there, but Gonzo, Kayjay and a bunch of assorted conference types were. From their manic conversation, I gathered I wasn't the only one who'd seen unconventional stuff:

'They can't be vampires. It's a hoax. Somebody's faking it.'

'I saw one of them turn into a wolf, Ibrahimssen!'

'It must be Valeriani! He's been making vampire servants all this time!'

'Wolves, bats, deathwatch beetles...'

'It's shapeshifters, then — Mims or something. Just an alien invasion. Not vampires.'

'They're drinking blood! They're infecting people!'

'How does one recognise deathwatch beetles specifically?'

'Németh, how quickly does the vampire pathogen take effect?'

'It depends on the strain. Sometimes subjects take weeks to die, then rise again weeks later. Sometimes it's a matter of hours. That's only the most powerful strains, though.'

...they said.

It seemed the creatures had been attacking all over campus. Nobody knew whether the Ravensfoot police had been called.

I messaged Bernice and Ellie's rooms. Nobody answered.

'Do you know another reason why they can't be vampires?' Gonzo was hollering. 'Because it's broad bloody daylight out there, that's why bloody not!'

It was a point, but I hadn't leisure now to worry about it. I was one of a crowd of alleged vampire experts, all now realising they hadn't a clue what these things could really do, and now my girlfriend (yes, I know, possibly

premature, but under the circs I wasn't making fine distinctions) wasn't answering her calls.

Some dryworlder was dripping on about how vampires can't tread holy ground, and we should use the Uni chapel for sanctuary, and getting the 'Well, actually FCU's a secular foundation' speech. McHorowitz the folklorist, who'd spoken the first afternoon (I hadn't gone — Gonzo said he was dull as runoff) was insisting we had to scatter rice behind us as we ran, and the undead would stop to pick up all the grains, while everyone else told him just how cretin-faced that was. Gonzo, our glorious convenor, was still insisting that the things were shapeshifting aliens.

None of it helped us when they crashed the bar.

There were six ex-humans and something that had been Dr Mep'to the Ias'par. The six came bursting through the windows — ravens and bats and big grey dogs, hissing and clawing. Mep'to stood the door, whipping razory leaves at anyone coming too close. The sensory band round his upper trunk was glowing purple, and he was rustling like a forest in a fury.

The glass had flown out from the smashed windows, cutting people up. We saw them get pinned down, their cuts and gashes opened further by those daggered teeth. The things came back to human as they slurped, clawing at anyone stupid enough to come near.

Valeriani wasn't with them still, but Yatson was. As far as I could see, the Indy Stud Prof's personality — what little there'd been of it — had vanished, gone in red rage and violent hunger.

The air tasted of copper and salt.

I worked at Groundhog Zero in my undergrad hols (well, it was that or back home to the mud-farm), so I know the back ways out. I leapt the bar and smashed through the tiny kitchens. Gonzo and Kayjay plus a handful of others followed me. Last I saw as the door slammed shut was Dr Mep'to felling a barstaff with an outswinging branch, and plunging his roots into the writhing body.

Inspired by the Summerfield family motto, I grabbed a bottle of vodka as we ran through. It seemed more likely to solve my problems than one of the kg bags of rice.

I headed for Burnum Plaza, which has waterpaths running along all five sides. Unless they came in underground (and yes, for all I know there's kms of cabling ducts and vents and construction passages in the campus mound, but still), they couldn't get us there.

'But what does Valeriani want from us?' McHorowitz was wailing. 'I was sceptical, yes, but I would have accepted his account in the end! There was never any need for this!' Which may have been missing the point somewhat.

The vampires from the bar — the six ex-groundhogs, anyway — were at the plaza now. They moved with a weird motion — upper bodies held unnaturally still, legs moving kind of crablike, like they were gliding. I

was relieved to see them stop at the waterpath, growling and glaring. So far they'd not said anything articulate — not like silver-tongue Valeriani. I wondered if that came from being just-resurrected or something. We'd all seen Yatson alive and non-bloodthirsty just the day before.

None of the alleged vampirologists knew, obv.

After what Kayjay'd said about vampires of different species getting different abilities, I had a moment's fretage when old Mep'to lumbered up to join the undead humans — but he, like them, stopped at the edge of the water. Blood dripped off his roots, trailing down the waterpath like petrolspill.

Now I guessed, remembering the survivor scenes in all those horror-films, we waited for the police or militia or someone to come airlift us. I'd no idea how much of the campus had been panicked. If these guys were all there was, then maybe the other attendees were still down at the Lang Building, getting on with their conference. The big priest, Duke, might be giving his paper now, wondering where Gonzo and the rest of us'd got to.

Or he might be shambling about the place, giant fangs gaping, chanting for blood.

These undead really didn't seem bothered by the Fea-light, which very much bothered me. 'Didn't Valeriani make a big issue out of sunlight, Gonz?' I asked him. 'Not going outside and all? I thought that was part of your accommodation nightmare.' Gonzo just grunted helplessly.

We stood there for a couple of hours, occasionally passing round the vodka. Rare passers-by heard our shouted warnings, stopped to enjoy a colourful piece of street theatre and got shredded by vampires. We never did manage to convince them in time.

I messaged Ellie again, but no reply. I just hoped she was having the good sense to stay in her Grandma's rooms.

Evench Fea went down behind the buildings. The Plaza's autolighting stuttered on to cover the short dark. The vampires just stood there and stared at us, which again was a relief — I'd been guessing dark was what they were waiting for.

Then, as Nemhain rose, they all turned and walked silently away into the lightening shadows. Mep'to was slower than the others — by the time he blundered out of view, his leaves were smouldering with blue smoke.

'OK, that's weird,' I said. 'They're only affected by Nemhain. Must be the wavelength of the light or something.'

'That doesn't make sense,' said Gonz — by now contradicting on principle anything anyone said re vampires. 'How can only one wavelength burn them?'

'Don't argue, Gonz,' I said (remembering uneasily now that white Fea puts out all the red and blue wavelengths the others do, plus the yellows, greens, purples and all). 'However it works, we're safe now till Nemhain-set. By which time we can all be kms away.'

The others began to see the logic, and started to relax. I got my pad out to message Ellie one more time, tell her I was coming for her.

And then, with a fetid explosion of swampy decay-smell, the second wave of creatures arrived.

Frogs, octopi, giant electric eel or lamprey things, flopped up out of the waterpaths, metamorphosing as they came into undead Lavellans.

Their skins were grey, like gutted fish. They had sharp tusks and mad red eyes. One of them was poor bloody Krev, of course. We must be dealing with one of Kayjay's 'powerful' strains.

Hysterically, I wondered how much seeing a webfoot vampire would irk Prof Stassy.

We scattered. I tried to keep track of the others, but there were too many panicked people, too many exits from the Plaza. I saw McHorowitz go down, blood spraying from an arm mashed in a Lavellan mouth. I think they got Kayjay too — I can't be sure. Not Gonz, I don't think.

I had to try finding Ellie — try getting her (and Bernice, I guess) off-campus, and if necessary offworld, soon as I could.

But then I remembered Mum and Ma, so I stopped at a slipterm and sent you that last. Sis, if you're coming, do bring Riq, and pref eight to ten of his biggest pals. I really mean it.

The campus felt deserted, scarily quiet. I'd no clue whether everyone was dead, or just indoors. Ellie still hadn't answered any of my messages.

At least I still had the vodka.

I made my way to Bernice and Ellie's rooms. I knocked, but no reply. I tried the door and opened it, and Granny Summerfield came at me yelling, and smashed a vase of flowers over my head.

I got her calmed — she's having a lie down now — and cleaned myself up a bit, but she's too witless still to tell me where Ellie went.

I feel really bad, Mein. I think she went out to find me. I can't bear thinking of what could've happened.

But what can I do? She didn't find me out there. If I go out again, we'll miss each other. I know she won't abandon her Granny. She'll come back here evench, unless she's...

Shit.

I needed space to use Bernice's slipterm, anyway, so you'd believe my last. Now I have, I don't know what to do. I just don't.

I guess I'll wait here, for a bit. Until I just can't bear to, any more.

I miss you, Sis.

Love, Lloyd

From the journal of Imogen Tantry

Wednesday 21 June, afternoon:

I spent lunch time awaiting Dr Valeriani outside his rooms. Fr Duke is, as far as I know, still absent in Ravensfoot, and seems impervious to my increasingly agitated messages.

On his return Valeriani, though hardly pleased to see me, took my unlooked-for presence in his lengthy stride. 'Dr Tantry,' he said. 'People will begin to talk. Do come in. Mi casa es, as they say, tu casa.'

This time I accepted a drink. I watched as Valeriani set about preparing it deftly, elegantly, and with a barely detectable flourish of showmanship. By the time he handed me the gin and tonic, his knowing smile told me of his conviction that I was by now altogether in his thrall.

'Now, Dr Tantry,' he said. 'Or, as this is our third date, may I call you Imogen? To what do I owe this particular instance of the pleasure?'

My hand was satisfyingly steady as I sipped the drink, savouring its bitter tang. My recent experiences had served to focus my mind, and I could now see that the dark fascination which had exerted such power over me during our previous encounters, was actually a rather tawdry sexual cocktail of alpha-male magnetism mixed with carefully observed and controlled body-language. At present it had no effect on me whatsoever.

'Dr Valeriani,' I asked him, 'what would you say if I told you that you were not the only vampire on Murigen?'

His jet eyes gazed at me with perfect composure. 'I would believe you, of course, but I'd be surprised,' he said. 'I've met none here I recognise, and we tend to cross one another's paths over the centuries. It might be a novice, of course, but however adept they were at fooling you mortals, I doubt very much that they'd be able to conceal their true nature from me.' He raised an eyebrow. 'But perhaps this is somebody I haven't met? Someone located here on Murigen yet, perverse though it might seem, boycotting our little conference?'

'I'm afraid not,' I said harshly. 'It's Fr Finlay.'

He stared at me for a second, then laughed uproariously, enormously amused to see the mousy, serious little priest making a joke. Then, registering my expression, he stopped. 'Tut surely you can't be serious?' he said softly. 'My, I believe you are. You're suggesting that Dr Finlay has been... recruited?'

Sparing myself no details, I told him of my encounter of last night, and watched that impregnable self-assurance shatter before my eyes.

'You're sure?' he said at last, childlike and wondering. 'Of course you are, it's foolish of me to doubt it. My dear girl, I'm so sorry. For your sake, I mean, of course,' he added. 'As far as Antonio Finlay's concerned, now he's been liberated from the shackles of sanctimonious dogma — no offence — I've no doubt he'll make a fine addition to our ranks.' His mockery sounded decidedly shaky now, but he seemed sincere as he concluded, 'Tut my dear, what a terrible trauma for you. And naturally — of course you must—you suspect me.'

'The thought had crossed my mind,' I said primly.

In point of fact, his first reaction had convinced me that the half-formed conviction with which I had arrived had been an accurate one, but I had a perverse desire to see how far he would go in defending himself.

'Then I can only assure you,' he declared, his bell-like voice ringing unusually hollow, 'that it was not I who did this. I haven't turned a mortal to the dark ways for a great many lifetimes, and you can be assured that if I were to choose an eternal companion to share the night with me, it wouldn't be the esteemed Dr Finlay. You must be correct: there's surely another of my kind here. I mean to say, a third.'

'Well, yes and no,' I said, certain of myself now. I took a long sip from my drink. 'Certainly somebody "recruited" Antonio, and I believe that it wasn't you. However, while I was right to say that you're not the only vampire on Murigen, it's true mainly in the pedantically accurate sense that you are not, in fact, a vampire.'

Shock, outrage, crestfallen nobility and finally a schoolboy's guilty grin rippled across his face in instants, replaced by dignified sobriety.

'You're a very intelligent young woman,' he said gravely. 'I could of course protest my case at grandiose and indignant length, but it's obvious that it would do no good. I shan't insult you with it.'

Aside from his charismatic rhetoric during this conference, Emanuel Valeriani has not offered a shred of evidence that he is what he claims to be, the sole exception being those cheap schlock-effects of his bed of soil (which is, I should imagine, rather comfortable, though hardly conducive to personal hygiene) and the blood-bank in his wardrobe.

His ability to seduce a crowd into believing what most began by considering an outright absurdity is an even greater testament to his exceptional powers of persuasion than the fascination he has been exerting over me. My willingness to believe, however, that this theatrical

old roué might actually be one of the savage and tormented creatures whom we had come here to discuss, had evaporated at the moment when I awoke and allowed myself to reflect upon the horror of my encounter with the walking corpse of the late Antonio Finlay.

Valeriani was standing now. 'Dr Emanuel Valeriani is a fiction,' he said. 'Both in his persona as a historian and in his more outlandish attributes.' He bowed deeply. 'You compel me to reintroduce myself as the Stupefying Valeriani: mesmerist, mentalist, illusionist and, I can hardly neglect to admit under the circumstances, habitual hoaxer.'

'You hoax under your stage name?' I asked, genuinely curious.

'To be honest, hardly anyone out here's heard of me.' He shrugged his immense shoulders. 'Hence the need for a publicity stunt. I'm preparing a tour of the local colony worlds, and my agent on Cheiral suggested scamming the Vampirology Conference as an effective way of drumming up local interest. He found an imaginative history graduate working for a coffee chain, and had her research my paper for me.'

His dark brows furled. 'Imogen, if I were to express the fervent hope that this whole conversation has been a ruse aimed at flushing me out, would I be clutching at straws?'

Evening:

Valeriani's second-hand knowledge of vampires is no more reliable than my own, and probably much less so than that of many of the scholars present at our conference. I realised that it would be of little use to me if I was to track down and, as I suppose I must, destroy the creature responsible for Finlay's debased state.

While I am relieved that the creature in question is not Valeriani (for I may now freely admit that I rather like him), I must also admit that I would prefer it, from the point of view of sheer expedience, were he not a complete fraud. Although he has proved of worth, a tame vampire would still be a more useful ally in this endeavour than a stage hypnotist.

My experiences last night confirmed that he had at least been correct, albeit by sheer luck, about the vampires' inability to cross the campus waterpaths. I shared with Valeriani my fear, arising from Finlay's parting words, that the vampires intended to circumvent this vulnerability by swelling their numbers from the local aquatic species.

'Based on this morning's session on the Haemovorax pathogen,' Valeriani rumbled, 'I fear that they may well succeed. Apparently vampires from amphibious races end up with a mirror-image of the traditional weaknesses: they're at home in water, whether flowing or stagnant, but somehow impaired on land. They feel unable to cross certain types of soil, or only able to walk on paths, that sort of thing.'

While it was reassuring to know that such a vampire would not be altogether invincible, I had had a further realisation. Though holy water

also had its effect on Finlay, I cannot rule out the possibility that this is not a universal affliction of the breed, but was due either to my own belief in its holiness, or to what remains of Finlay's own. I was appalled to realise that if faith had indeed been the deciding factor, then the Lavellans would lack any such protection.

'If what I believe is true,' I said, 'and God considers the Lavellans as precious as any other of His creatures, then where is the divine justice in leaving them defenceless in that way? Or, if it's the vampires' own faith that matters, in making them such an attractive instrument for our enemies?'

'I've said I'll help in any way I can,' said Valeriani. 'But when it comes to second-guessing God, your reverence, you're on your own.'

We had not yet discussed the use I had in mind for the Stupefying Valeriani's powers of mesmerism. I believed, or rather I hoped, that there was one human delegate present who had first-hand experience of vampires. Unfortunately, such useful knowledge as she might possess was buried under layers of fantasy and dementia.

It might indeed have been the trauma of her previous encounter with the creatures which had precipitated Prof. Summerfield's mental collapse. However, were I to persuade her granddaughter to let Valeriani hypnotise the professor, it was possible that he might uncover vital information concerning our adversaries.

Valeriani considered the proposal gravely. 'Therapeutic hypnotism has never been my area of expertise. I can only promise to try.'

The campus was strangely silent as we made our way, under the sapphire light of Nemhain, to Summerfield's guest quarters. I began to fear that, while Valeriani and I had been talking, Finlay and his new master had been acting rather more decisively.

We knocked on Prof. Summerfield's door. A scraggy young man tugged it open, crying 'Ellie?'

He was highly agitated, and (as I should have anticipated) seeing Valeriani did nothing for his composure. It took a great deal of effort to convince him that my companion was not a vampire, and I was reduced to blessing a cupful of water, then tipping it over Valeriani's head, before he would accept that the hypnotist was harmless. Valeriani bore this with all the gravitas of an escapologist being inserted headfirst into an airtight sack.

The young man handed him an already damp towel, then introduced himself as Lloyd Doihara, a postgraduate physicist. I had last seen him helping Miss Summerfield to escort her grandmother back to her room, following her second embarrassing outburst.

Mr Doihara explained that there had been vampire attacks (of which Valeriani was naturally widely considered the instigator) across the campus, and that Elanore Summerfield was missing. As I had feared, the vampires now count Lavellans among their number. 'Plus it turns out

the bastards are daylight-capable,' Doihara said. 'At least, sunlight's no guarantee, unless you know the vampire you're dealing with. I think I've worked that bit out, actually.'

We asked to see the professor, and he took us through to her bedroom. Bernice Summerfield was sitting on the bed, staring absently at the handful of paper volumes lined up on the single bookshelf. Her thin frail frame gave the impression of having been altogether vacated: a being 'unsouled' in a distressingly literal sense.

'I wrote some of these,' she said, not looking up at us. 'At least, someone with my name must have done. I had a clone once, did you know that? Or was it me who was the clone? I forget.'

Valeriani half-cajoled and half-wrestled her onto the bed, then sent me outside to wait with Lloyd Doihara.

He left the door ajar, and we soon heard him speaking in a soothing monotone.

Doihara had obviously been giving considerable thought to the logic of vampirism. 'Most planets only have the one sun, right?' he explained to me. 'They're light in day-time, dark at night-time, end of. So most of their animals turn out nocturnal or diurnal, vampires included. It doesn't work that way on Murigen, obv. Turns out undead here only get to be nocturnal according to one of the three suns. Last one to go down before they get bitten, next one up, whatever. Basically, they each have one that affects them, and can work up a nice tan under either of the others.'

It seemed plausible, based upon what he had already told me of the vampires' earlier behaviour, and in particular the shift system which they had apparently been operating in Burnum Plaza. 'But what if they travel to another star-system?' I asked. 'Our vampire-maker almost certainly wasn't recruited on Murigen, so which of the three will they be vulnerable to?'

Doihara had evidently not considered this. 'Mm. Can't be based on what Nemhain, Macha and Fea were doing at the time, can it? They're always shining somewhere on Murigen — planets are spheres. They teach you that kind of thing when you're a physicist.'

We heard the professor's voice from the bedroom. Apparently she was answering Valeriani now, which I hoped might be a promising sign.

Doihara said, 'Maybe it works that way for all vampires, then. Maybe it's just the sun in the system where they get vampired that makes them go all flammable later. Not much help when you're confined to just one planet, natch, but these days... that would mean if a vampire leaves their home system, sunlight's never a prob for them again.' He frowned slightly. 'Though I guess they might find starlight from that one direction painful.'

We heard the sound of shouting from the bedroom, and the crash of (as I assumed) Summerfield's books being swept from their shelf. Before we could offer our help, Valeriani emerged.

He sounded professionally affronted than anything else as he said, 'This

woman is already hypnotised. The influence is of long standing, and very deep-seated. I would imagine this is why she hasn't been herself.'

Doihara frowned. 'Can you break it, Doc?'

'I'm sorry to say it's too powerful for me to lift alone. Fortunately, Bernice is also fighting it as hard as she can.'

We listened as he explained that each person has a natural rest position, a mental default state to which they frequently return. Hypnosis, as employed in psychotherapy, often involves regressing the patient to a time and place at which they felt comfortable and at peace. Unfortunately, Valeriani told us, most of Prof. Summerfield's pleasant memories had been contaminated by more recent traumatic events.

Nonetheless, the mesmerist believed that if we might establish her in whichever state it was in which she felt most herself, then this might act as a password to unlock the rest of her identity. With this accomplished, and with Valeriani's help, Prof. Summerfield would be able to overcome her hypnotic shackles, reassert control over her actions, and perhaps tell us at last about the tribulations which she had faced on Alukah.

'But what would her default state be?' I wondered. 'What aspect of Professor Summerfield's life is most essential to her psyche? Should we bury a relic for her to dig up, perhaps?'

'Bugger you,' croaked a voice. 'I'm not a bloody squirrel.'

We saw that the old woman had appeared in the doorframe behind Valeriani. She spoke like someone in a daze. 'I'm not sure what I am, to be honest,' she continued. 'I can't keep track of everything, you know. I've had a hundred million godchildren, but I admit I had trouble adjusting to a granddaughter. Blood's thicker than sea-water, they say. Mind you,' she added plaintively, 'some liquids are thicker still.'

Doihara had been looking indecisive. Now he said, 'I've got a long shot that could do it, if we're lucky.' He crossed to the trenchcoat which hung upon a peg next to the door.

'What's that?' I asked, as he withdrew from his coat-pocket a half-full bottle of clear fluid.

'It's a solution,' Doihara said. 'Perhaps.'

'Floyd,' said Prof. Summerfield, 'if that's what I think it is, you can shag my relatives any day of the week.'

The Narrative of Bernice Summerfield

`I've been an archaeologist a long time now, and I've been an awful lot of digs. Most of those have gone smoothly — well, perhaps not most, but a sizeable minority.

`Well, some must have, I'm sure. Not that I can actually...

`OK — I've been on a lot of digs, and a couple of them only went mildly wrong. Most of the rest fell apart spectacularly, some turned into bloodbaths and a couple... Well, don't go there. In fact, you can't. They're still designated Priority A Disaster Zones.

`Alukah, though... none of the others was anything like Alukah.

`The Fomalhaut Museum of Forerunner Artefacts sent half a dozen of us to excavate the Blood Citadel. At the recommendation of Simukai Rossi, an old colleague of mine who's now their Assistant Curator, they put me in charge of the expedition. My second, a expert on Forerunner cultures called Mungo Cripps, thought it should have been him, but his paycheque convinced him otherwise. Which probably meant it was bigger than mine, for all the good it did the poor bugger.

`The Museum had arranged for corporate sponsorship from a terraforming corporation called, rather literal-mindedly, TerraCorp. Most of that came in kind, in the loan of the Jehovah Trowel. The poor dears had at least tried to come up with an imaginative name for that one.

`We had no idea what to expect, so we did our best to cover all the bases. Our ecologist, Crayfish, doubled as a palaeozoologist and trebled as a palaeobotanist, and our cataloguer-archivist Shabbir had dabbled in palaeotechnology. Our linguist Parvesh only had the one speciality, but as he'd translated the gestural language of the AI statues at Insectile Cortex K in just a week using a phone-camera and a spiral-bound notebook, we were pretty sure he was the best available.

`Our sixth member was Davina, on loan from TerraCorp, who worked the Trowel and acted as team medic.

`I've had to dig some bloody awful places in my time, but the dark side of Alukah was one of the most unprepossessing. It isn't just as black as pitch,

it's freezing cold, and smothered in dust so fine it's virtually monatomic. We were all wearing four or five layers of thermal clothing, and we still spent half an hour every sleep-shift washing the stuff out of our crevices.

`We'd rigged up floodlights all around the perimeter, but as we found more and more of the Citadel the crater we were sitting in got wider and wider, until they illuminated hardly any of it. Outside our brightly-lit environment dome we mostly relied on echolocation goggles.

`At first nothing went wrong, which always makes me worry. Our early personality clashes were easily ironed out, everyone did their job like a professional, even the Trowel worked the way it was supposed to. By the time it exposed the topmost turret of the Citadel, I was seriously unnerved by more than a week of continuous smooth running. When that gratuitously phallic tip poked out into the freezing air, I presumed that my shiver of foreboding was down to sheer paranoia.

`The Blood Citadel of Alukah is a yet-to-be-determined number of billions of years old. It's made of rock — basalt, marble, granite, slate - sourced from a hundred worlds, all of it as black as an eclipse in a oil-well. We only uncovered the battlements and roof area, but from extrapolating the structure downwards, it must stand kilometres tall. Some of our depth-soundings suggested that it also has vaults, extending as far or further below ground.

`We waited until we had more of the structure exposed before we went in. We'd been bombarding it with sonar to get an idea of the layout, sending in microdrones to analyse the air for toxins or pathogens, all that sort of thing. It was rather refreshing to be on an expedition that could afford that kind of precaution — most corporate sponsors consider academics not dying of million-year-old spore infections to be part of the de luxe package.

`We decided to start exploring with that tallest turret, which we'd come to realise was nowhere near the centre of the Citadel. The whole place was profoundly asymmetric — but more than that, even in detail, it just didn't make *sense*. Some of the gables seemed to be on upside down, gargoyles faced walls, the battlements had stupidly obvious defensive flaws. Worse still, though, none of this seemed quite random. You felt it had all been carefully worked out according to a logic which you might come to grasp one day, if only you went gibbering mad first.

`At the beginning of the wake-shift when we planned to go inside, Shabbir came to see me. He was a big man, strong enough to upend one of the dust-sleds and check the underside for obstructions. Hairy bloke, too. He reminded me of... oh, dear. Well, never mind. He said a lot of things about the need for conscientiousness and circumspection, and other perfectly respectable multi-syllable words, but the bottom line was that he was shit-scared. Scared of the Citadel, towering over us now like the Tower of Babel in a particularly psychotic medieval painting, and scared of what we might find inside.

Mungo had been telling all and sundry the legends about the Alukahites, and I think Shab was scared of them as well.

`I tried to reassure him. I could hardly admit that I felt exactly the same.

`Four of us went in — Mungo, Shab, Parvesh and me. We left Davina and Crayfish back at the dome.

`I won't give you all the details about what we found there. I suppose I might still write it up some day, but it was extravagantly horrible, and right now I haven't really got the stomach for it.

`We charted three chambers on that first exploration: the Mural Room, which at that point was at dust level, the Tomb Room above it and the Skeleton Room on top of that. None of us were feeling particularly imaginative that day.

`All three of them were vast, shaped like a squished oval — because the Alukahites couldn't have made their turrets circular, oh no — and windowless. The aperture through which we'd entered seemed to be an irregularly-shaped door, leading in from a ledge which would originally have been miles above ground.

`Each chamber was spiralled by a flight of stairs which ran around the inside of the wall, like in a lighthouse. The stairs themselves were gigantic, with narrow human-sized steps cut into the innermost edge as an afterthought.

`The Mural Room shook all of us up, even Mungo and me. We'd seen enough to know that even relatively civilised cultures can produce artwork of unbelievable sadism at times, whether as a decadent power-fantasy or a macho boast. It didn't mean that any of the scenes depicted had ever happened in reality.

`The Skeleton Room changed our minds on that one.

`The Tomb Room, in between the two, was the strangest. Spaced out irregularly across the floor were a number — I think it was nineteen — of big stone sarcophagi. I say "big", but they were on the human scale, like the big stone tombs built for rich people in very old churches. They all had inscriptions in a brutally ugly alphabet, which Parvesh swooped upon with squeals of glee.

`Tombs in an attic room are unusual, to say the least, but the Alukahites obviously hadn't had much truck with the conventions of architecture.

`We were in the Tomb Room when Shabbir stabbed himself. He'd been documenting the skeletons in the chamber above — very professionally given his earlier misgivings, not to mention the sheer shuddering horror of the place. He'd been meticulous, clearing away stray drifts of dust with his trowel, placing scale markers for comparison in every holograph.

`The skeletons were of various species — some recognisable as distant relatives of present-day sentients, most not. One lot might have looked humanoid if they'd had their skins on, but the bone-structure was quite different.

‘We’d come back down, anyway, and I’d joined Parvesh and Mungo while Shab took close-ups of the carvings on the tombs. Parvesh was inarticulate with enthusiasm, insisting that the language was a previously unknown root-tongue, an ursprache with similarities to everything from Osirian to

. His boyish excitement was so engaging I entirely forgot about Shab, until we heard him grunt, then cry out in pain.

‘He’d somehow fallen on his trowel, embedding it in his arm. He’d hit a vein, and there was a lot of blood. The men hefted him up onto one of the tombs so I could tie a tourniquet, and Mungo sent a message for Davina to come and join us with a stretcher. Between the four of us we managed to wrangle Shab’s weight down the colossal stairway, and out of the aperture in the wall into the starlit dust-crater.

‘We got his arm patched up back at the dome, and Davina resupplied him with some of our synthetic plasma. I went back to the Tomb Room with Crayfish, to clean up the blood. Most of it seemed to have gone — drained away somewhere, leaving a rust-coloured stain behind. Contaminating millennia-old sites with anachronistic DNA’s considered bad form of course, but there wasn’t a lot that we could do about it by then.

‘As I left the Tomb Room I thought I heard a sound of scratching, like a distant dog dragging a bone, but I dismissed it as a trick of the echoes.

‘Did I not mention the echoes? Well, I said I wasn’t going to go into the more horrible details. Just use your imaginations. Back at the base, the others were getting on with work — the theoretical analysis which may be a less exciting aspect of field archaeology than being chased over rope bridges by spear-wielding natives, but still needs to get done.

‘Mungo was working on a theory that the Alukahites had a reversed view of status, with uppermost spaces used for servants and other utilities, and the lowest chambers down in the vaults reserved for the nobles. There was no way we could check that yet, of course, and I suspect now that he was trying to rationalise insanity.

‘I was making huge bounds of progress towards deciphering the inscriptions. He’d even got a handle on the phonetics, by correlating the syllabary he was building with some of the oldest root-terms for “vampire”. He spent most of the evening uttering implausible words full of apostrophes and hissing consonants.

‘Crayfish said — as I’d suspected, and as the legends had suggested from the start — that the skeletons we’d seen were from a number of different worlds, and that it was unlikely any of them were native to Alukah.

‘Davina said Shabbir had gone to sleep, that she was doing the same and that if we had any bloody sense so would the rest of us.

‘I was feeling knackered, so I took her advice. I had predictably horrible dreams about dripping blood and crawling skeletons.

‘When I got out of bed for the next wake-shift, Shabbir had gone. Parvesh, who’d fallen asleep over his notes in the communal area, claimed not to have seen him. I banged on everybody else’s doors to wake them up,

but apart from the gratifying embarrassment of Crayfish and Davina, who we discovered together, nothing new came to light.

`Mungo said, "Well, the lad got interrupted holographing the Tomb Room, didn't he? Maybe he went back to finish the job."

`I felt that it was possible to take conscientiousness too far, and said so fairly vocally.

`Mungo was right, though. We found Shab collapsed in the Tomb Room, next to the same sarcophagus we'd laid him out on the day before. His wound had reopened itself somehow, and he'd bled to death. Again, the blood had all but vanished from the floor, proving that if nothing else the Alukahites had understood the importance of good drainage.

`We spent that wake-cycle numb with shock. None of us had known Shabbir at all well, but he'd been a pleasant, generous colleague. He was a reserved man, but we each had memories of some small kindness he'd done us. Only Parvesh, graver than usual but still engrossed in his inscriptions, seemed to want to carry on with work.

`We discussed for a long time whether we should curtail the expedition, but a lot of time and money had been invested in it, and nobody felt Shab would want that wasted. Eventually we agreed that Mungo should take his body home when our next supply ship called, in six days' time, and come back with a replacement team member as soon as the Museum could arrange it.

`Shortly before the end of the shift, Parvesh claimed a breakthrough. He'd been concentrating — as a tribute he claimed, rather macabrely — on deciphering the engraving on the tomb where Shabbir had died. He now announced that it read "HERE ROTS RE'OLENA, LEAST OF THE CHATTELS OF THE LORD EKIMMU, BANISHED UNTO DEATH FOR THE CRIME OF LAUGHTER."

"Cheery blooming lot, these Alukahites," said Mungo.

not what we thought, though," Parvesh said, probably trying to temper his excitement but failing dismally. "It's not a necropolis where the Alukahites buried their servants. It's the prison graveyard."

the first part of the site we enter turns out to be the Citadel's penal wing," I said. "Lovely."

`Privately, I had my doubts. Given the reputation the giant Forerunners had had, these could well have been their normal domestic arrangements, with variants awaiting us in every part of the complex.

`That sleep-shift, my dreams were clearer. I saw the crawling skeleton creep across the crater floor to our environment dome, and scratch at the airlock, like naked trees scraping a window.

`I woke in a sweat, and had to calm myself down with a nip or two of whisky — a rather good single malt, actually. As soon as I fell back to sleep, though, the skeleton was back, inside the dome this time, stooped over a figure huddled in a chair. As it stood to leave it turned its bony face to grin at me, and I realised that it had learned to walk.

Parvesh died that shift. We found him sitting lifeless and limp, his notebook in his lap. His body had been drained of all its blood.

We may have been academics, but we weren't complete idiots. The legends said the giants of Alukah were vampires, as were their servants. It was perfectly obvious to even the most sceptical of us — which was Mungo, as it happens — that, even after billions of years, one of them wasn't as dead as those legends claimed.

Even so, I found for some reason that I was strangely reluctant to tell the others about my dreams.

We sent out an SOS immediately. I didn't need to forbid everyone from going back to the Citadel — nobody would have considered it for a moment. We sealed ourselves inside the dome as best we could and sat tight, waiting for help. We heard back from a freighter passing through the outer fringes of our comms range — the Alukah system's not exactly Procyon Hub, so we were lucky to find anyone at all. They told us they'd be there as soon as they could, but that would probably be a couple of days.

At my suggestion — which I made as discreetly as possible, so as not to alarm the others — Davina locked Shab's and Parvesh's bodies inside the infirmary. I desperately hoped we wouldn't need to start sticking spikes through things and cutting stuff off. I'd had enough of that for one lifetime.

Again I dreamed of an intruder in the dome. This time it arrived as a walking skeleton, and left a gaunt old woman, with loose baggy skin hanging from her bones. The next wake-shift Mungo and I found Davina and Crayfish, clinched tight together in a cold embrace. I was thankful that they'd at least been taken together.

Still without telling Mungo about my dreams, I made him help me carry all four bodies outside the dome, and pin them down under the dust-sleds. Remembering Shab's party trick, I weighted his sled with fuel-drums.

Mungo and I barricaded ourselves into my room, with every bit of furniture we could carry piled against the door. At first we agreed to keep watch in shifts, each while the other slept, but... well. You would have thought sex would be the last thing on our minds under the circumstances. I suppose it must have been the same for Davina and Crayfish, huddling together for warmth on the brink of the abyss.

After a while, I fell asleep. I came out of my usual ghastly dreams to see the woman — solid and real, younger and fleshier than before — suckling at Mungo's seeping neck. His eyes stared blankly at the ceiling, and his breath came in tiny gasps.

She paused for long enough to grin at me with bloodied teeth. She said, "Sleep, Benny," and I did.

When I next awoke Mungo was cold and empty, and I had fresh red welts on my wrist. I felt feeble and terribly alone. I went to the infirmary, but all the synthetic plasma had been taken.

I dragged Mungo outside with the others, and made a pile of them all

on top of the dust-sleds. Struggling to lift the canisters, I emptied fuel over each of them.

`I filled that icy plain with hot bright fire, warming myself by the light of my friends burning. The pyre was a beacon for the freighter's shuttle, as it homed in on my tiny, chilly body.

`As it descended from the starry sky, the woman walked out from the Citadel, and approached me under the pale floodlights. She looked almost plump now, her skin pink and rosy under her downy fur. She smiled at me with knife-sharp teeth, and took my hand. She reminded me of my son Peter.

`Goddess, poor Peter. I haven't thought about him for...

`The shuttle landed, disgorging a group of tough-looking men and women, loaders and stevedores.

They approached us warily where we stood, framed by the flames.

`The young woman next to me squeezed my hand, and I heard myself call out to them.

"`It's all right," I appeared to be saying. "We're the people you've come to rescue. I'm Bernice Summerfield, I was in charge of this expedition."

`The girl looked expectantly at me, and I felt suddenly embarrassed. "Oh yes," I said, "I'm terribly sorry... And this young lady is my granddaughter."

FCU, Wednesday 21 June

Mein

Drown me, I'm such an idiot. A five-star, 24-carat, 100-percent dismal shambling avatar of blind groping idiocy.

Our Vampire Zero isn't Valeriani. Turns out he was a fake, a hoaxer come to con the locals, just like I thought at first. Upshot, it's not him. It's...

Oh, shit.

It's Ellie, Mein. She isn't Bernice's granddaughter at all — she's some mummified living-corpse thing the Prof dug up from a tomb on some benighted cesstank of a planet. Ever since she's had Benny in her thrall — drinking her blood nightly, daily top-ups of hypno-power, all that. She's been converting people into things like her. She's been the one behind all these attacks — behind my friends getting **torn to pieces** — and all the time she's been playing me like some bloody kids' game. Puffing me this way and that like a paper sailboat.

I didn't believe at first. Valeriani turned up at Benny's rooms a few hours ago with Rev Imogen the priest-girl, and de-thralled Benny using hypno-powers of his own, plus ample sloshings of my vodka.

With her marbles back the Prof's a different lady — sharp as a needle, with a ruthless streak and a cutting line in sarcasm. She doesn't even look as old. That parasitic bitch has been keeping her withered and feeble-minded.

We sat her down with the last of the vodka and she told us all about digging up this ancient vampire nest, the Blood Citadel. All that cess in her lecture about giant blood-sucking bat-demons — turns out it was all true, after all. Well, you learn stuff.

Then she told us where Ellie came from, and I swirled.

'You're mad!' I protested for ages, like the twat I am. 'She's your granddaughter, you stupid old drowner!'

I told Valeriani the de-thralling hadn't worked, that Benny was as big a

mentalist as he was. I told Imogen (who'd been scribbling on her palmpad most of the while Valeriani was working his magic, then used it to record Benny's story to data) that it was all a vampire plot and we both needed to get away.

Then I accused her and the other priests of being in on it.

I said a flood of stupid twatty things, while the other three just sat and looked sympathetic at me.

Evench I ran out of wind, and Imogen said, 'Try not to feel angry with yourself, Mr Doihara.' (She doesn't seem to like first names.) 'Vampire or not, it's very easy for somebody completely ruthless to make others fall in love with them.'

I was swelling up to tell her just what she could do with her spiritual solace, when Benny interrupted. 'Why him, though? I mean, no offence, Lloyd, you're a perfectly likeable bloke. But I don't imagine Ellie — Re'Olena — was longing for a little romance in her life. She's the servant of some of the most evil beings this universe has ever brought forth, she's just escaped from a billion years of entombment — I don't think her priority's going to be dinner, the movies and a cuddle on the sofa. Sorry.'

I said, 'Whether Ellie's this skeleton-woman or not —'

'She is,' said Bernice. 'Sorry to be blunt, Lloyd, but I know what I saw on Alukah, and I don't have any grandchildren. I just wish we knew what she was planning. Whatever it is, apparently she needs an army for it. On Alukah she killed everybody just to replenish herself — she only left me alive so I could take her off-planet. Since we got to Murigen, she's been actively recruiting.'

'That suggests that she has some goal here,' Valeriani observed. 'What could possibly interest her on Murigen?'

'Hey!' I said. I was getting pretty irked now. 'I live here, remember? Whatev, we need to find Ellie. And we need to do it while Nemhain's still up, so we only have the Lavellan vampires to fret over.'

'We need a plan first,' Prof S insisted. 'You're right, though, the suns are important.'

We worked out between us that Krev and the other webfoots'd got bitten while Fea was up, and turned out into the Plaza at Fea-set — so they're scared of the sun they got bitten under. The groundhogs and Mep'to, on the other, had eddied off as soon as Nemhain came up, which we guessed meant they'd all been bitten under Nemhain.

'Early this morning sometime,' I said. 'That would fit — I guess it's the next sun to set after they're vampired that chargrills them. Most places that would just mean the local sun, even if it happened most of a day-night cycle later.'

'Good thinking,' Benny said. 'The priest was bitten some time earlier, of course, because Imogen saw him as a vampire late last night.' She was talking about Finlay the exorcist, who the Rev says was one of the first to get transubstantiated.

'Perhaps he's the one who recruited Yatson and Mep'to and the others — in fact, that's probably what they had in mind for Imogen. They must have identified the priests as a potential threat.'

'Mep'to too,' I realised. 'Ias'par flesh is wood, basically, and they're way strong. He could've used his branches as stakes, spiked the vampires through the heart with them. If they'd let him live he'd've been a walking weapon, just like the priests. Cess knows what they thought was dangerous about Yatson, though.'

'Perhaps they thought he'd bore them to death,' said the Rev, then looked shocked. 'I'm sorry, that's a terrible thing to say.' Perhaps I liked her more than I'd thought.

'In any case,' Valeriani declared, 'the Lavellans have been recruiting under Nemhain, which would mean —'

'Exactly,' said Bernice. 'As soon as Nemhain sets, we'll have three waves of vampires out in force. They've timed it so Macha doesn't bother any of them.'

'That's what I've been saying!' I wailed.

But Benny'd still not finished. 'Imogen, you said you only realised Valeriani here was innocent after you'd met Finlay. In fact, you thought he might have been trying to warn you.'

'I believe that some residue of Finlay's former character persists,' said Imogen. 'Not consciously perhaps, but sufficiently to influence his present actions.' She shrugged. 'Of course, he might be less sympathetic now that I've thrown caustic fluid in his face. He used to believe that vampires were irredeemably evil. If that belief survives, it could make him a worse vampire than he would have been otherwise.'

'It might be that.' The Prof sounded sceptical. 'It could be that vampires just don't play well together. They're natural loners — the predatory instinct makes them turn on one another. Boss vampires always have henchman trouble. It's why they've never formed a civilisation, except for Alukah. That was a special case.'

Benny thought Finlay'd been deliberately undermining Ellie (if that's who's behind all this, I was telling myself still) — or doing the best he could, at least. 'Her will's so strong it's like being caught in a hurricane,' she said, 'but I could stagger this way and that ahead of the blast. I rebelled in small ways, like getting plastered when she wasn't looking — pass on my thanks to Appalling Steve, by the way. If we want to bring Re'Olena down, Finlay could be an ally.'

'Thanks for the warning, Gran,' said Ellie.

We jumped up, swore and leapt about the room in panic for a bit.

Of course I couldn't've mistaken the voice, but I couldn't see Ellie either. I wondered if she was invisible, if that was just another thing vampires could do and I'd skipped that lecture. Then Valeriani pointed out the big yellow cat sitting just underneath the now-open window.

'Miaow,' it said clearly in Ellie's voice, then grew in instants up to human

height, filling out into all those enticing curves I'd been so idiot-lustful to explore. I believed then.

'It's been you doing this!' I hollered. 'You absolute — I thought I loved you! You've been killing my friends! Making people into hateful, vicious...'

'Lloyd,' Bernice said sharply. 'We're all angry. Me more than you, probably. You need to keep your head.'

I said, 'You killed Krev and Kayjay and Yatson and Mep'to and — bloody McHorowitz, for —'

I stopped as Ellie looked at me, as human now as ever. For a mo I felt my heart go soft and murky for her all over again. 'Don't — don't be angry with me, Lloyd,' she said. 'Yes, I've done bad things. I — I've killed people. I couldn't help myself.'

Those dark-green eyes were awash with tears. 'They took me this afternoon, just after I left you on the Tower. I tried to fight, but they were so *strong*. They turned me into this.'

My Ellie — my Beautiful Elanore — was begging me to save her. 'Oh Lloyd, I'm so lost. I don't who I am any more. Please help me, Lloyd.'

Bernice started telling me not to be a twat, and so did Imogen and Valeriani. I knew, though.

'The cat,' I said. 'It's been around since Monday.'

'Bugger, you're right,' said Ellie, tears evaporated at once. 'Still, it was worth a try.' She stretched luxuriously.

'You utter bitch,' I said.

Horribly, she smiled. 'I do believe the word for a female cat — especially a breeding female — is a queen.' Her furry face hardened. 'Don't kid yourself though, Lloyd. It may not have happened today, or any time this epoch, but it happened. We were *made* what we are. The Lords didn't ask for volunteers.'

'You've adjusted pretty well to the lifestyle,' I said bitterly.

'Oh, I have,' she purred. 'Valeriani, put down that kitchen-knife and come here.'

While we weren't looking, Valeriani'd drifted over to the kitchen area. 'Certainly not,' he said, then gasped as Ellie — Re'Olena — turned to stare at him.

She kept their eyes locked, saying, 'I don't like people undoing my work. Now come over here, you pathetic charlatan.'

The hypnotist's hands were shaking. 'You can't,' he said. He dropped the knife. 'Not me. I know the methods. They won't... work on... me...'

He took a step towards her.

Then another. Please... he gasped, as he stumbled across the room.

'Try closing your eyes,' Olena said, smiling as he approached her. 'Or better still...,' she added, and clawed them out.

Valeriani screamed, and so did I. The vampire's savage clawswipe had taken off a large chunk of his face, spattering fleshy red stuff across the room in an arc. Valeriani fell, spasming and gurgling like a netted fish.

And Imogen made her move. I'd seen her clicking with her palmpad — now she held a screenful of text in front of her, and whipped a wooden cross out of her pocket with her other hand. She stepped up, reciting a bunch of holy gibber: 'Pater noster, qui es in caelis, sanctificetur nomen tuum...' Her voice was wobbly, but she didn't falter.

Just like in the flims.

Olena stood even taller, taller than she'd ever been when playing the sweet young thing. Her eyes were darker suddenly, and so was her hair and fur. Valeriani's blood was on her right hand, and dripping down the walls. He was still twitching on the floor.

'You child,' Olena spat at the Rev. 'When I was alive, nobody dreamed of the god you cling to. Your dead messiah's evolutionary ancestors were worms while my masters' wings were encircling the universe. What was he then, your god, eh? The Lords were the only gods we had, and they were gods of blood and death and offal. What semi-conscious dogma, what superstition of a half-evolved savage, could ever make you imagine that your dead ape-god might have any power over me?'

Imogen paused in her litany. (Is litany the right word? Actually, it possibly is.) She kept her bible-pad and cross held up, though. 'It's an interesting point,' she said, flatly. 'You'll forgive me if I prefer not to discuss it under the circumstances. For the moment, it should suffice that I have faith.'

And Sis, you'll barely credit it but Re'Olena flinched. Just for a sec, just a flicker before she reared up to hiss contemptuously at Imogen — but it'd jabbed her, I'd seen it.

Bernice had spotted it — turns out, like Valeriani, she's a body-language expert. 'You go girl!' she yelled.

Olena dithered. Imogen advanced. She'd switched to normal language now. Well, normal-ish: '...and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil...'

The vampire bitch stepped backwards. 'Stupid girl,' she sneered. 'Your friend, the good father? He gave himself to me willingly. He begged me to take him, at the end. He barely even noticed you, but he noticed me. Decades of celibacy make a man inept, but terribly enthusiastic.'

Imogen wasn't wavering. She'd started over: '...thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on Murigen as it is in heaven...' She was backing Olena up towards the window her cat-form'd come in by.

'I'll take you, too,' Olena was spitting now. 'Take you and enter you and pump my seed into you while you moan, and you'll enjoy it, you prissy little virgin —'

The Rev didn't waver: '...as we forgive those who trespass against us...'

Olena leaped backwards without looking, landed on the windowsill, crouched like a gargoyle, still hissing. 'Take you make you break your bones kill you raise you hurt you more kill you then hurt you then kill you again —'

Then the Rev thrust forward one last time with cross and bible, and the

thing fell backwards, toppling out of Benny's rooms towards the ground below.

We all went quiet. Then Benny gasped, 'Is that pavement or waterpath down there?' and we rushed to the window.

We all saw Re'Olena, reverted to her yellow catshape, fall towards the channel of fast-flowing water underneath. Moments before she splashed, a big black bat-thing sped out of the shadows, gathered the cat up in its talons and flapped away with it trailing blue smoke. It gave off foul fumes as it flew, but hid itself quickly again in the shade of a building.

We took a while to get breathing properly again. Then Bernice said, 'Bloody sodding bollocks on stilts. That was a hell of a performance, Imogen.'

She sounded kind of muted about it, and not surprising with Valeriani spread across the floor like that, now long past twitching.

'Well done, Rev,' I said, and gave Imogen a hug. She went bright red, but suffered it.

We couldn't do anything for Valeriani, except check he was utterly def dead — and, in my case, throw up extensively in Benny's washbasin. Not much of a tribute for the poor bastard, I know.

Macha was rising over Ravensfoot, which meant we'd not long before Nemhain disappeared and took our protection away. Fortunately (clever little bro that I am, Sis) I knew what we had to do.

'The lab,' I said. 'That's where I saw the cat before — Prof Leustassavil Construction of Channels' lab in the Phys Dept. The vampires are after the quantum-channelling tech.'

That's the reason Ellie was interested in me, of course. Perfectly likeable Lloyd.

So here we are now — back at Stassy's lab. The campus was empty while we came — no groundhogs, webfoots or vampires to be seen. The undead were regrouping, obv, after their mistress's little setback. We made our way across to the labs, got Prof Stassy to let us in and started explaining the sitch. Nemhain's right at the horizon now, a tiny turquoise bulge. We've got Imogen on door duty, but we're still working on the plan for when our three waves of nosferatu arrive.

Well, that and writing one last slip to each of our loved ones. Turns out Bernice has a real son on Fomalhaut IV. Imogen's got a dad and sis and little nephew on Earth. I don't know about Stassy.

And I've got you, Mein. We all know we may not -
- out of time. Gotta slip this now.

I love you, Sis. Said before, never meant more than now.

Lloyd

Thursday 22 June:

Prof. Leustassavil Construction of Channels' laboratory is surprisingly shabby for the location of such revolutionary work. The walls have not been painted in many years, and the corners are piled with abandoned equipment, swathed in dust. Leustassavil's workpool, though fed constantly with fresh water, is blemished by a slick of greasy litter bobbing in one corner.

Since the racks of equipment for her current experiments are clean and well-maintained (thanks in large part to Lloyd Doihara's untiring and little-appreciated assistance), I can only assume that the professor finds such squalor conducive to her work.

Leustassavil is a black-furred Lavellan of around my own unimposing height, her soiled apron-pockets full of tools and unidentifiable technological components. She showed us little patience when we arrived shortly after midnight, and it took all of Prof. Summerfield's persuasive powers to entice her to check the campus' online bulletin boards for recent news. If only we had had Valeriani with us still.

Having done so, of course, Leustassavil reluctantly accepted that the danger facing her from creatures of human folklore was not only possible but immediate. Like Prof. Summerfield's late colleagues, the Lavellan, though an academic, is not altogether lacking in common sense.

Meanwhile, I have been tasked with the defence of the laboratory. I write this as the sapphire light of Nemhain fades in the corridor outside the laboratory, to be replaced with the ominous crimson of rising Macha. I expect my task to begin in earnest shortly. My feelings concerning this are (to speak with considerable restraint) ambivalent. Seeing poor Valeriani so vilely yet casually destroyed before my eyes has shaken me badly; yet my repulsion of his murderess has given me some confidence that my faith is not founded, as Antonio Finlay's was, on sand. Where Antonio's rigidity eventually caused him to break, my flexibility has proved itself a strength.

There is, indeed, much about my beliefs which is negotiable. I may have given myself to the church, but I have little doubt that, had I not been raised a Catholic, I could have been as devout a Hindu or Buddhist. The constant of my faith (and, I believe, of all true religion) is that God is love; and love is something to which this vampire queen has demonstrated herself implacably opposed. In a contest between my God and Re'Olena's Lords, there can be no sliver of doubt as to where my loyalty lies.

Yet Finlay fell, and who knows what private faiths were held by the vampires' other victims? God did not protect Valeriani; and if not him, why me?

The all-loving Lord in whom my faith resides does not play favourites. I do not believe that it was through His agency that Prof. Summerfield, Mr Doihara and I were saved.

Nor are the trappings of Christianity likely, as Re'Olena herself observed, to be objects of fear to this particular vampire. No: in the terms of Finlay's paper (delivered, as it seems, so long ago that I have difficulty in recalling it), it is the pluralists whose claims stand up best to scrutiny. It is clear to me now that it is faith alone, regardless of the truth or falsity of its object, which protects us from the vampires.

Naturally I still believe the object of my own belief to be a worthy one, and acknowledge that whatever qualities I have I owe to my creator. Nonetheless, it was I and I alone who saved two of my three friends in Bernice's rooms, through what amounts to sheer bloody-minded stubbornness. Should this admittedly characteristic trait of mine fail me, no divine aid will be forthcoming to supplement it, any more than if we faced death in an earthquake or a shuttle accident.

I sometimes wish that my religion really was, as people often helpfully inform me, 'unthinking superstition'. At present, a lack of intellectual clarity would do wonders for my state of mind.

Later:

As Nemhain's ambience finally withdrew altogether from the corridor, the vampires returned. Their eyes and teeth gleamed red in Macha's light as they advanced.

Prof. Summerfield and the others had done their best to secure the laboratory windows, so I expected to face the full brunt of the attack. I raised my data-pad, with the text of the 23rd Psalm visible, and the crucifix which I had taken from Antonio Finlay's rooms.

I do not know for how long I held them back. It seemed like an eternity: probably it was a matter of minutes. When the laboratory fell, it was not because I failed.

The vampires at the door were a distraction. Whatever ancient ability it was which had allowed Re'Olena to gain entry to Prof. Summerfield's locked rooms, and before that to her sealed environment-dome on

Alukah, had served her once again. She stood beneath an open window from which the barricade had fallen clean away, bearing in her arms an inert form which Doihara and the others recognised as that of his friend and our erstwhile convenor, Dr Gonzalo Ibrahimssen.

'Call off your priest,' she told my friends. 'It's time to say "amen".' Her fangs had swollen to several times their earlier size, stretching her mouth and warping her young voice into a snarl. She brought them down against Ibrahimssen's jugular vein.

At Bernice's instruction, I withdrew into the laboratory. I crossed to join her, Doihara and Leustassavil next to a stack of shelves. I stopped praying aloud, although I do not believe that anything could have persuaded me at that point to cease doing so internally. The vampires poured in behind me, crowding the laboratory and forcing the four of us into a defensive huddle against the shelves. They menaced us with row on row of teeth and talons. That smell of distant or deferred decay which I recalled from my first meeting with the altered Finlay, was now almost overpowering.

I recognised Prof. Yatson, Dr McHorowitz and a number of others, as well as the lumbering quercous form of Dr Mep'to.

'Shit,' I heard Doihara mutter. 'I guess Appalling Steve won't be fretting about those grades now.'

In my own case, it was the face of Antonio Finlay, distorted and feral, which occupied the majority of my attention. The red burns which I had inflicted were still vivid, and his voice remained desiccated as he crooned, 'Your faith is an inspiration to us all, Imogen. I'm glad that you'll be laying down its burden very soon.'

'You were an inspiration to me, Antonio,' I told him sadly. 'What faith I have, I owe to you. I saw God working through you, making Himself real in my life and the world. If only you'd looked properly at yourself, you could have held back a sea of vampires.'

He said curtly, 'My work is for a greater power now.'

Leustassavil was also staring at the newcomers, especially the Lavellans. 'How ridiculous,' she said at last, dismissively. 'You should be ashamed of yourselves.'

Olena snorted. 'Still proud of that rationality of yours, professor?' Finlay glided over to join her, and she tossed Ibrahimssen contemptuously into his arms. Evidently feeling a need to show off to her captive audience, she had her servants retrieve a sheet of polished metal from the heaps of scrap in the corners of the room. They held it upright as she displayed herself in front of it. Reflected, the room was empty but for the four of us and an eerily floating Ibrahimssen.

It is a horribly uncanny effect to see in operation, somehow causing one to doubt one's own existence far more than that of the vampire.

'Hold on,' Leustassavil grumbled, 'I'm not wearing my spectacles.' She searched her apron-pocket until she found them, then placed them upon her broad flat face. She grunted.

'Kind of a deal-breaker, isn't it, Prof?' Doihara said. 'Turns out we're in the wrong line of work after all.'

'Don't be ludicrous, Lloyd,' Leustassavil sighed. 'It seems counterintuitive because it's a second-order effect, that's all. The what-d'you-call-her's modifying the photons as they reflect from her body. Normally each atom in a mirror reacts to the incident photons by emitting a secondary waveform, with the probability tending towards one that they'll add up to a reflection when observed. This woman's acting as a higher-order observer, entangling the photons with her awareness and scrambling that probabilistic response so the tendency's towards zero instead.'

Everybody in the room stared at her, the vampires included. She shrugged. 'Obviously it's not a phenomenon I've seen before, but there's nothing "magical" about it. Honestly, you humans and your superstitions.'

One of the vampires blurted out, 'I said it was a quantum —', then fell silent.

Re'Olena rolled her eyes. 'Focus, Krisztina-Judit.' She pushed away the makeshift mirror, which clattered to the concrete floor. 'It doesn't matter what you believe about us, Leustassavil. We've got a job for you, and we're going to kill your friends one by one until you do it for us.'

'Well, why didn't you say so,' Leustassavil tutted, 'instead of preening like a first-year Fashion Studies student? What is it you need?'

Succinctly at first, but soon succumbing to a temptation towards quite unnecessary rhetorical grandiloquence, the vampire queen explained her intentions. These were, in fact, quite straightforward: Leustassavil's prototype quantum channels would be used as she had always eventually intended, as an interstellar transport system. In this case it would be Re'Olena's monstrous creatures who used them to travel directly across interstellar space, spreading her seed from world to world. With the professor's help, the vampire contagion would disseminate itself across a hundred inhabited planets, the quantum channels their disease vector.

'We're going to reclaim our birthright,' Olena snarled, as the Lavellan busied herself and Doihara about her equipment. 'We'll quench Murigen's wretched suns and build a new Blood Citadel right here. The more my seed spreads, the more worlds will come here to give me fealty in blood. We'll be the empire that we were in past aeons, drawing the life-blood from whole galaxies. The firmament itself will stream with blood! The Lords of Alukah will claw their way to wakefulness, hungry to suckle on the gory teat of the universe — and find that the least of the chattels of the Lord Ekimmu is their empress!'

'Well, I'm impressed,' Prof. Summerfield said. She sounded firmer, more in control of herself, as if all this danger were acting to rejuvenate her. 'Except for the part where you're completely mad, of course. Oh, sorry, that was all of it, wasn't it?'

'Crack as wisely as you can, Granny,' growled Olena. 'Leustassavil, are you ready?'

I tried to consider what alternatives were open to the Lavellan scientist. Depressingly, I could think of none. All possible delaying tactics (such as opening a channel under running water, or into holy ground which the vampires would be unable to pass) relied on the prototype having implausibly precise directional control, and would achieve little more than the deaths of as many hostages as Olena felt it needful to kill in order sufficiently to admonish Leustassavil.

The Lavellan ushered the vampires away from three precisely selected areas of the laboratory floor. 'I'm not opening more than three at once,' she said. 'Any more than that and we'll risk the implosion of the whole building, which wouldn't do any of us any good.'

She added that the entire project would have been infeasible less than a week earlier, but that as it happened she had experienced a breakthrough during the week. 'I'd have made better progress still if you hadn't been so intent on seducing my only research assistant,' she complained. 'Incidentally, the co-ordinate system's pretty crude at present, I can't guarantee that these channels will open at ground level.'

'Not a problem,' said Olena. At a gesture from her, three of her servants began to transform themselves into flying creatures. Now we'll begin,' she said. 'Let's start with — oh, let me see, which planets shall we choose? Fomalhaut IV, I think. Then... hmm. Ah yes, Beta Caprisis and Vador Prime.'

I remembered Summerfield saying that her son was on Fomalhaut. From her expression I could tell that the other worlds were also of particular significance to her. 'That girl really knows how to hold a grudge,' she muttered.

Frowning, Doihara consulted an online astrogational chart, and read out a series of co-ordinates to Leustassavil. The Lavellan grunted again and said to Re'Olena, 'You're sure about this?'

Olena looked exasperated. 'I'm about to make my spawn the dominant life-form of the universe, Leustassavil, of course I'm sure. Don't you have children?'

'Certainly not,' the Lavellan replied. 'I haven't the time for that sort of thing. Off we go, then,' she said, and touched her screenboard.

At once the laboratory was flooded with blinding light and scorching heat. Violet-white rays exploded into every crevice, etching their shadows across walls. The room was filled with rushing wind, and an immediately overpowering heat.

Everywhere, vampires began to scream.

All around Re'Olena, her creatures were cowering back from the three light-sources, blue, white and purple, which had opened into the free spaces on the laboratory floor. First one, then another, burst into flames, and soon the room was filled with tongues of fire.

Olena turned in fury, her face an animal mask. 'What have you done?' she bellowed.

'Well, opened channels to separate points a few thousand kilometres above the surfaces of Fea and Nemhain respectively, obviously,' Leustassavil said. 'Can't take the credit, it was her idea.' She gestured at Bernice.

'The third one opens on the sun of Alukah,' Summerfield yelled, over what I now understood was the noise of air exploding into superheated plasma. Sounding disappointed, she added, 'Which you're not reacting to. Damn, I was hoping you were turned on Alukah itself.'

Throughout the laboratory human and Lavellan shapes were staggering this way and that, billowing smoke and fire, their fanged mouths wailing piteously. A few shifted their shapes uncontrollably, shucking burning flesh as they flickered between their original and animal forms. Mep'to whirled screeching, shedding blackened leaves.

Of all those present, only the queen vampire was unaffected. Even I felt my skin blistering in the heat. Olena strode through her combusting children, pushing past their feebly flailing bodies to stand before the aperture from which the violet beams were pouring.

She basked in it for a moment, then cried, 'The Lords came to our worlds, you stupid woman, and picked the best of us! What will you do, open a portal to every sun in the night sky?'

'Ah well,' said Bernice. 'You can't blame a girl for trying. Up to you now, Imogen, I think.'

Startled, I said something inapposite like, 'What?'

Re'Olena was shouting, 'Incinerate my army if you must! Cremate every servant I've made! As long as I live there'll be more — a flood of writhing seed you'll never dam!' Her silhouette against the purple blaze had begun to enlarge and deform.

'At this point faith's the only weapon we've got left,' Bernice reminded me. 'And you're the only priest here.'

'She is not,' a voice croaked. A burning figure had shambled up beside us, more blackened corpse than man. Merely to form words in that cindered throat must have taken incredible reserves of self-control.

'Imogen,' the vampire rasped. 'You said — you implied... Did you have faith in me?'

I forced myself to swallow all the shock and terror I was feeling. 'Yes, Antonio, I did,' I told him firmly. 'I still do.'

'Then you're right,' said the remains of Fr Finlay. 'I can still do God's work.'

Olena was becoming something terrible: vast, ancient and feline, with scimitar teeth through which she bellowed barely coherent threats. She crouched against that hellish circle of flame, poised to spring.

I pressed Finlay's crucifix into his disintegrating hand. Any pain he may have felt in touching it was surely eclipsed for him by the greater agony of Fea's immolating gaze. He staggered forward, holding up the cross.

Olena reared, huge and shaggy. 'Antonio? You'd dare?' she slurred. 'You'd turn against your mother, maker, mistress?'

'I've turned against my true maker,' Finlay gasped. 'And my mother church. I repent of that now. I repent, and I intend to atone.'

'Traitor!' she bellowed.

'Twice over,' Finlay agreed. 'Perhaps we do descend from Judas, after all.' Slowly, but with gathering strength, he began to stammer the Our Father. Olena roared again, extending scything claws. Still clutching his crucifix, Finlay staggered into their savage embrace.

Repelled by the religious object (and for all I know by Finlay himself, the object of my own faith just at that moment), Olena recoiled. Still reciting the prayer, still brandishing the symbol, Finlay pressed himself against the great razor-toothed figure, forcing her backwards through the violet aperture.

The pair of them toppled and fell.

We all watched breathless as Olena and the burning debris of my friend plummeted through the quantum channel, into the searing heat of the star which shines at Alukah's antipodes. Surrounded by disintegrating cinders, the giant figure fell into the violet glare, dwindling swiftly, until she was lost forever against the light.

Then, one by one, Leustassavil's machines burned out, and the rings of blistering starlight vanished.

Gonzalo Ibrahimssen lay unmoving in a slick of ash. Aside from him, the four of us were altogether alone, in a room thick with soot and the stench of scorching.

Friday 23 June:

I have been evacuated to Ravensfoot, along with the remaining survivors. I, and the others who were present in the lab when Leustassavil opened her pathways to the stars, are being treated for shock and radiation burns.

Fr Duke arrived on campus shortly after the danger had past, a squad of Ravensfoot police in tow. To persuade them that he was sane and reliable had involved contacting Bishop Ss'foth on Cheiral, apparently not a straightforward task. By the time he achieved it, a steady stream of refugees had begun reaching Ravensfoot with stories of their own.

At first the vampires had prevented any witnesses from escaping, presumably to protect themselves from interference. After Re'Olena concentrated her forces in the laboratory, however, the living began to flee.

Two hours after Fr Duke, Lloyd Doihara's mothers arrived, together with a hastily-assembled force of rural militia.

Their daughter Meinir had apprised them of the situation on the campus, and they had rallied at once to protect their son. They are brave and admirable women, and I quite see why both Lloyd and Meinir would wish to conduct their filial relationships with them across interstellar distances.

Some bodies have been found on campus, but aside from shows of strength like the slaughter of Valeriani, the vampires were recruiting rather than killing. At present, we assume that the remains of most of the missing are to be found in Leustassavil's laboratory along with those of Tomek Yatson, Stephen Cicero, Krisztina-Judit Nemeth, Krevellistu Integration of Functions, Fujio McHorowitz and Mep'to.

If there are any vampire survivors, then they are keeping a very low profile indeed.

Many of the survivors are disturbed in ways which go beyond mere shock. (I myself keep seeing poor Valeriani's sickening death replayed before my eyes.) Vampires are the very essence of the irrational, an irruption of chaos into our ordered world. Blood, water, soil and sunlight interact with them in uncharacteristic and disconcerting ways. The laws of chemistry, biology and optics appear to bend around them.

Only a supremely rational mind, like that of Leustassavil Construction of Channels, can gaze into such depths of absurdity and tut in disappointment at what it sees there.

The Lavellans, Prof. Leustassavil especially, place great store by reason, and to their utter unsusceptibility to the supposed superstitions of other species. A direct confrontation with a vampire might well shake anybody's faith in the normal operation of the universe.

Not Leustassavil, however. In her lab, the vampires menaced the rest of us, not her. Olena even told her that she would kill her 'friends' until she co-operated. Yet Leustassavil barely knew most of us. Surely it would have been more effective to have threatened the professor directly?

I now believe that the vampires would have found it impossible to harm her. In the very face of the irrational, Leustassavil's belief in reason remained resolute.

I was concerned that God had deprived the Lavellans of a natural defence against the vampires. I should have had more faith.

Of the survivors, Dr Ibrahimssen is stable but unconscious in the Ravensfoot hospital. He was badly beaten, and suffered burns from being in the midst of so many immolating vampires. Given that the Interdisciplinary Conference was his idea, a number of people are of the opinion that this is no more than the poor man deserves.

Such is the vengeful mood among the survivors that it is almost fortunate that Valeriani, whom we bury tomorrow, did not survive. Most still blame the attacks upon his assumed vampire persona. I suspect that the Stupefying Valeriani's theatrical tour of the region would have been badly received here on Murigen.

I am afraid that I shall miss him dreadfully, as I already miss Antonio Finlay.

I wonder, at the end, what motivated Antonio to pre-empt his inevitable demise through self-sacrifice. Was it, as it certainly seemed to all of us at the time, the remnant of his lost humanity finally reasserting itself? Or

was it merely, as Bernice suspects, the natural antipathy of any vampire to the authority of a fellow vampire?

Though there can be no doubt of the evil they wrought here on Murigen, I find it all but impossible now to see vampires as beyond redemption, as Fr Finlay believed them to be when he was human. As Fr Duke observes, predators are a constant of our universe, whether by God's design or thanks to the agency of some corrupting power. Many sentient species are carnivorous, and no more of them are unsouled than of any other biological type.

I could, I think, formulate a theology which viewed humanity's ever-present vampire cousins as a natural evolutionary presence in Earth's history, close kin to us save for their greater ruthlessness: Cain to our Abel, perhaps, or even *Homo sapiens* to our *Homo neanderthalis*. I could ascribe them souls in their own right, as capable of seeking and receiving salvation as those of humanity.

To be sure, their innate urge to sin is far stronger than our own. How much more saintly, then, the vampire who resists it, laying down his life for his friends?

A vampire saint? The church would undergo convulsions. Perhaps I had best keep these particular reflections to myself.

From the diary of Prof. Bernice Summerfield

Saturday 24 June 2609:

We're well into the mopping-up operations now. Which, now we've held Valeriani's funeral, probably means it's time for me to leave. So far everyone's been thoughtful enough not to bring up the fact that it was me who brought Re'Olena here to Murigen, and my expedition on Alukah which dug her up in the first place. It's only a matter of time, though.

So yes, time to be going, I think.

I've contacted Peter on Fomalhaut IV — he's been going spare with worry about me, of course, but Simukai's been taking good care of him. She's managed to stop him running away and following me to Alukah four times so far. I can thank her for that, if hardly for getting me the job on Alukah. Which, incidentally, I'm going to have to make damn sure is quarantined about a hundred times as effectively as ever happened on Badblood.

The next time an old colleague gets in touch and offers me work...

...well, I'm going to say yes, aren't I?

Clearly.

This is me we're talking about.

But I really, honestly am going to sit down and have a good long sensible think about it first.

It's been a real shock to the system, being so old. I'm pretty sure the white hair and the wrinkles are temporary, the result of dear Ellie's nightly depredations. I'm filling out in the middle, as well, which is something I never thought I'd be thankful for.

It's less the physical stuff, though, than the horrible mental degradation. Even if Olena's befuddling influence wasn't real senile dementia, it felt an awful lot like it.

Lloyd thought I was 80 or 90. In fact, if we go by the calendar and ignore the time-travel, I should be 68. (Actually, hell — Wednesday would have been my 69th birthday. I must have been too wrapped up in trivialities like not getting myself killed to notice.) Thanks to my temporal relocation,

plus a certain amount of divine intervention, I've been bearing up pretty well.

I'm looking younger now than I did this morning, even, so I shouldn't give poor Peter too huge a fright when he sees me again.

(God, I miss him. Poor little sod, all those months thinking I was probably dead...)

One day though, I will be that old, and it'll be for real. No clever tricks to bring me back from the brink. There's only so many times you can pull that off in a lifetime.

Will I have grandchildren? Heaven only knows. For all I know, Peter will never be remotely interested. The descendants from the future I thought I'd met are... probably out of the question, now.

Olena... well, it's odd. She was brutal and monstrous, as evil a being as I've met. She killed my — well, let's not exaggerate, the truth is bad enough — she killed some perfectly nice people who could have become my friends, and one who could perhaps have been more than that, if we'd all had longer to get to know each other.

She posed as part of my family, drained my energy daily, kept me lobotomised for months. Then killed lots more people. I'm glad she's gone, of course I am. But still...

Like she said, nobody chooses to become a vampire. (Or rather, the few who do are bloody idiots.) She can only have been a child all those billions of years ago, when the Lord Ekimmu swooped down from the skies, leathery and terrible, and took her as his blood-price.

If something like that ever happened to Peter, would I hammer a stake through him? Would I buggery. He'd make a truly terrifying vampire king, but I'd only ever see my poor, sweet, brutalised little boy.

'Least of the chattels,' for God's sake. What's that going to do to somebody's sense of self-worth?

Was that protectiveness of mine, that maternal instinct, something that Olena had spent those aeons secretly craving? Was that why she posed as my granddaughter, persuaded even me that that was what she was — so that I'd *love* her? Is that what she saw in Lloyd, too?

In public, Ellie was kind, attentive, patient... if I ever do have grandchildren, I could do far worse than what Elanore Summerfield appeared to be.

Still, no sense crying for her now. She's either dead, or...

...actually, I've just realised that we never did find out whether this particular strain of vampires were susceptible to fire. Sunlight, yes — provided it was a specific sun — but ordinary combustion?

It's one of the classics, of course, along with those jolly standbys staking, beheading and drowning. But I know, even if half of those assembled experts didn't, that there's more than one strain of vampire. Different bloodlines have different characteristics, and different weaknesses.

If Re'Olena was combustible, then never mind the specific-sun issue

— falling into a million-mile-wide ball of superheated plasma's going to smart, no matter which of them it happens to be. But if she wasn't...

Well, she escaped from Alukah. But entombment in a stone sarcophagus under a freezing desert has to be a breeze compared with climbing out of the gravity well of a sun.

Whether she's truly dead or not, we've seen the last we ever will of her.

No question of it. I mean, surely...

Second accompanying note from I.G. Ikigikato

Pendremellessen —

So there you have it. All in all, there's been remarkably little published on the Murigen Infraction. Historically speaking, for whatever reason, the whole affair's been brushed under the carpet. With such a wealth of source material, we should be able to put that right.

After all this time I think it's more than enough to justify a conference, don't you?

— IGI

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